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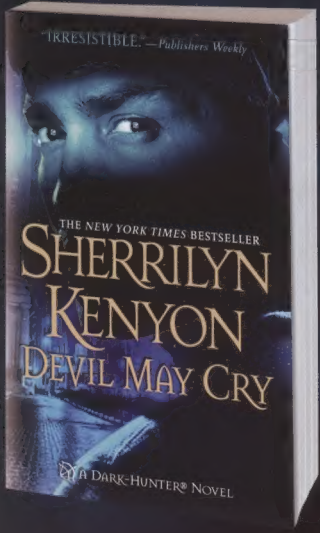

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BRADLEY P. BEAULIEU is a writer of speculative fiction who figured he'd better get serious about writing before he found himself on the wrong side of a lifelong career in software. His story, "In the Eyes of the Empress's Cat," was voted a Notable Stories of 2006 by the Million Writers Award. Other stories have appeared in *Writers of the Future*, *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and several DAW anthologies. Brad is a graduate of Clarion, Orson Scott Card's Literary Bootcamp, and Viable Paradise. He lives in Racine, Wisconsin, with his wife, daughter, and two cats, where he enjoys cooking spicy dishes and hiding out on the weekends with his family. For more, please visit *www.quillings.com*.

Danvers

DENNIS DANVERS has published seven novels, including *Circuit of Heaven* (New York Times Notable, 1998), *The Watch* (New York Times Notable, 2002; Booklist 10 Best SF novels, 2002), and *The Bright Spot* (under the pseudonym Robert Sydney). Recent short fiction includes stories in *Strange Horizons* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*. He teaches science fiction and fantasy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

WAY JENG didn't study writing, but he did study philosophy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This story marks his third appearance in *Realms of Fantasy*.

KATE RIEDEL was born and raised in Minnesota, but has been a card-carrying Canadian for years and years, and now lives in Toronto, Ontario. Publication credits include *Not One of Us*, *On Spec*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*.

Lee

TANITH LEE's most recent books include the adult fantasy Trilogy: *LION-WOLF, Cast a Bright Shadow, Here in Cold Hell*, and *No Flame But Mine*; the three YA novels: *Piratica, Piratica 2*, and *Piratica 3*; and *Metallic Love* (the sequel to her adult SF novel *The Silver Metal Lover*). And coming soon, two volumes of collected short stories, *Tempting the Gods* and *Hunting the Shadows*.

RAFFAELLA BENVENUTO, born and based in Rome, is currently doing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature on the subject of fairy tales. A former teacher of English and Italian language and literature, she has had a lifelong interest in the literature of the fantastic. Her special concern is the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, on whom she has written several articles, as well as having been the chief editor of the Italian translation of Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth*.

THEODORA GOSS was born in Hungary and now lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where she is working on her Ph.D. in English Literature at Boston University. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in many magazines and anthologies including *Realms of Fantasy*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Polyphony*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Journal of Mythic Arts*, *The Coyote Road*, and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. She has published two collections, *The Rose in Twelve Petals and Other Stories* and *In the Forest of Forgetting*. She is also co-editor of *Interfictions: An Anthology of Interstitial Writing*.

Winter

DARREN WINTER is a freelance illustrator based in the UK. He has illustrated book covers for numerous science fiction and fantasy titles in Europe and has produced illustrations for magazines including Britain's foremost science fiction and fantasy magazine *Interzone*.

Clarkson

ANDY B. CLARKSON is an artist and illustrator working in Columbus Ohio. He has worked for clients like Universal Studios, *The Progressive* Magazine, *Hustler* Magazine, and *Realms of Fantasy* Magazine, to name a few. His work has appeared in galleries and received awards including Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, ArtCrowd Magazine, Illustrators of the Future Contest. Andy's work can be seen at www.portfolios.com/AndyBClarkson.

PAUL WITCOVER was born in Zurich, Switzerland, in what is now a mental institution. He was the first infant to fly from Paris to New York aboard a commercial jetliner. He currently lives in New York City, where he works as a freelance editor and writer. His first novel, *Waking Beauty*, was chosen by *Locus* as one of the outstanding first novels of 1997. His second novel, *Tumbling After*, was published by HarperCollins in January 2005. In 2006 Dark Horse Press published his third novel, *Dracula: Asylum*, a "semi-sequel" to the Tod Browning film starring Bela Logosi.

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By Rosa Nelson

Jodie Foster and Abigail Breslin have a fantastic adventure in *Nim's Island.*

Nim's friends on the island are animals, including a walrus with personality. When her father is missing she looks to writer Alex Rover for assistance.

I like to think of myself as someone who knows how to navigate a bookstore. Give me a title and I'll breeze through any maze of aisles and scan the covers surrounding me until I find it. Like the ancient mariners who sailed by the stars, I don't need no stinking computer to get where I'm bound.

But when I looked for Wendy Orr's *Nim's Island*, I floundered. Why wasn't it in any of the science fiction and fantasy sections? It's coming out as a movie soon—surely the publisher has sent scads of copies out to stores, certain they'll be snapped up. Maybe that's the problem, I thought. They've sold out.

So I finally asked for help, and a girl who looked like a college freshman slumped as she wearily led me to the Action and Adventure aisle.

I was so surprised that the words came tumbling out before I could think. "But this is a fantasy book," I said. "What's it doing in Action and Adventure?"

The freshman just shrugged and walked away.

It wasn't long before I discovered the answer. The book itself is a terrific adventure with loads of action—and some fantasy elements. In other words, the action and adventure far outweigh the fantasy. But in the hands of director/ screenwriters Jennifer Flackett (TV's *L.A. Law* and *Beverly Hills 90210*) and Mark Levin (TV's *The Wonder Years*), the movie *Nim's Island* can hold its head up high as a bona fide fantasy film, due in theaters on April 4 from Fox-Walden.

"It's similar and different," says Levin about the book and the movie. "We have expanded the fantasy, definitely. There are a lot of fantastic elements. It's a lovely book, but it was written for a younger audience."

Nim's island photos by Phil Bray © Walden Media LLC

Nim's Island may have started out as a children's book, but the first actor to sign up was Jodie Foster (*The Brave One, Panic Room*) because she liked the script. Although the title character Nim is a girl, Foster plays an equally important role that promises to be quite unlike any character she's played before.

"Jodie discovered the script that we'd written," Levin says. "It's a gift for a director to be able to work with an actress like that."

And because Jodie Foster was the first actor to sign up for the movie, the filmmakers then were able to land their dream cast.

"We got our first choice in every single place," Flackett says about the cast. "We were very, very blessed. It was incredible."

The story begins with Nim (played by Abigail Breslin of *Signs* and *Little Miss Sunshine*), who lives with her father on their own secret island. Nim's father is a scientist who has just set sail to do some experiments nearby. Nim is bright and cheerful, and she never worries when her father leaves her behind. Because she's never known a human being other than her father, she's never lonely. Her friends are the animals on the island.

"The relationship with the animals is fantastic," says Levin, "but we're trying to be very real in these relationships. It's a strong friendship in the way that someone and their dog might have a very strong bond, like Lassie might want to save you if you were in trouble. We give those heroic

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attributes to the sea lion and lizard and the pelican."

Flackett and Levin have probably heard over and over and over again the adage made famous by actor W.C. Fields: Never work with kids or animals. "We quoted that many times," Flackett adds. "And storms at sea, we added to the list. The kids were not our problem at all."

Gerard Butler as Alex Rover

"The animals were generally quite good," Levin says. "Birds are hard to train and they were more challenging. But the sea lion was incredible."

"Selkie is a real pro," Flackett says about the sea lion. "Selkie is Academy Award-worthy."

When her father doesn't call or return when expected, Nim worries. It's not like him, and she suspects he's stranded and needs help. But what can a little girl alone on an island do?

Because her father is a scientist, the island has its own satellite dish and solar power generator so he can stay connected to the outside world by e-mail. Nim logs into his e-mail account with the intent of finding an adult to ask for help. She recognizes an e-mail message sent to her father by a famous author, Alex Rover (Gerard Butler of *300*), a mysterious adventurer in the vein of Indiana Jones who writes about his perilous, worldwide adventures. Alex is getting ready to write a new novel and has written to ask Nim's father a research question.

But it's Nim who responds, and she strikes up an online friendship with the action-adventure novelist.

Flackett says, "Alex Rover in Nim's imagination is the world's greatest adventure hero."

Levin adds, "And is born from the cover images on and illustrations in the books that she loves."

As the friendship between Nim and Alex grows, there's a problem. They fail to communicate because each makes assumptions and jumps to conclusions.

"It's an essential aspect of the book and the movie and the story itself," says Levin. "It's what motivates all the characters to do what they do, thinking the other person is someone else or has different needs."

Even though Nim asks Alex for advice, she fails to mention that she lives alone on an island—Alex assumes Nim is surrounded by family who can help her. Likewise, Alex has a secret and doesn't reveal it clearly to Nim.

Alex isn't a man. Alex Rover is actually Alexandra Rover (Foster). The big, strong, fearless adventurer with whom Nim assumes

SPRING FANTASY FILMS

As summer blockbuster season approaches, there's a wide variety of fantasy and horror movies slated for release this spring.

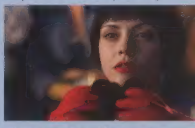
Due in theaters on April 4 from DreamWorks Pictures and Paramount Pictures, **The Ruins** is a horror movie with a simple warning: Don't go in the jungle. Screenwriter Scott Smith (*A Simple Plan*) adapted his own novel, which tells the story of four kids fresh out of college who are on the precipice of beginning their careers or graduate school. So they head off to Mexico for one last vacation before starting the next phase of their lives. They relax on the beach by day and party by night. They strike a new friendship with other tourists, including a German whose brother has gone missing. The German has a map to an archaeological dig site in the jungle that his brother left behind. The Americans decide to go along with their new friend into the jungle, thinking it'll be a fun day trip. After all, they're in the heart of the land of the ancient Mayan civilization.

The dig site is a remote one that isn't easy to find. Once they set foot on the site, strange things begin to happen. The site itself looks abandoned. The local villagers surround the site—they're armed and look ready to shoot anyone who tries to leave. And when the tourists investigate a mine shaft, it becomes clear they're not alone. Something deadly threatens to kill them if they stay on the dig site, and the local villagers are determined to keep them from leaving it. Stars include Jonathan Tucker (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), Laura Ramsey (*She's the Man*), Jena Malone (*Donnie Darko*), and Shawn Ashmore (*X-Men: The Last Stand*).

Iron Man (May 2, Paramount Pictures) stars Robert Downey Jr. (*Zodiac*) and is based on the Marvel comic book by the same name. Downey stars as Tony Stark, a billionaire who has no qualms about making weapons for the government. He's a big boy who makes big toys for the military. When he goes to a field test, Stark is kidnapped. But his captors aren't interested in ransom and they want to keep him alive so Stark can make weapons for them. He turns the table on the enemy. When given tools and raw materials, he secretly makes the equivalent of a modern-day suit of armor. He's able to escape by wearing the suit and fighting his way out. Stark learns of a plot against the U.S. and decides to become a superhero: Iron Man.

Speed Racer (May 9, Warner Bros.) is based on the 1960s TV anime series and is the first writing/directing collaboration of brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski since *The Matrix* movies. Emile Hirsch (*Into the Wild*, *Alpha Dog*) stars as Speed Racer, a talented racecar driver who is driven by the memory of his brother's death. Speed comes from a racing family. His father, Pops Racer (John Goodman of *Bee Movie* and TV's *Roseanne*) is a car designer who created Speed's car, the Mach 5.

Speed learns that corporate bigwigs have convinced famous race drivers to fix important races, all in the name of making a profit. When one of those bigwigs tries to tempt Speed, he turns down the offer despite the threat that he'll be prevented from ever winning another race.



Determined to prevail, Speed sets out to win the race that killed his brother by enlisting the help of his own rival,

she's communicating is actually a timid and meek woman who rarely sets foot outside her quiet home. Everything Alexandra Rover writes about is made up—none of it comes from experience.

Despite the fact that each makes the wrong assumption about the other, Nim and Alexandra have a lot in common. In addition to her animal friends on the island, Nim has imaginary friends; she imagines playing with the characters from her favorite novels. And Alexandra's constant companion is the character from her own novels: the imaginary Alex.

Alex and Nim—they're really kind of similar," says Flackett. "They both live in their imagination. Alex Rover has a very big part in the movie. The two of them—they're a little bit of the *African Queen* in the sense that there are two people on a road trip together and him egging [Alexandra] on. In the same way that Alex Rover exists to Alexandra, Nim has her own imaginary friends, so they're very similar. They have experiences with their imagination that are very, very real.

"We brought a degree of magical realism to the movie that may not be alluded to in the book," says Levin. "It's a very idyllic and magical world.

As Nim and Alexandra e-mail each other, something else magical happens. Alexandra's new book takes place on an island. She comes to realize that the island on which Nim lives is exactly like the imaginary island Alexandra has created in her head. Is Alexandra psychic? Once Alexandra understands that Nim is alone and her father has gone missing, the novelist swallows her fears, knowing she must travel around the world and try to find Nim's island and help the girl find her father.

"The plot is essentially the same [as the book]," says Levin. "In that there's a girl who lives on an island with her father and the

Racer X (Matthew Fox of TV's *Lost*). Susan Sarandon (*Dead Man Walking*, *Enchanted*) and Christina Ricci (*Black Snake Moan*) also star.

"They were always very big fans of *Speed Racer*," producer Joel Silver said in a press conference about why the Wachowski brothers chose this movie as their first project since *The Matrix* series. "It was the first time that they'd seen—when they were kids—Japanese animation, which made them understand there's a different kind of animation out there in the world. Having grown up on Hanna-Barbera, Fred Flintstone, and Yogi Bear, this was the first time they saw something that was really different. They're wonderful writers, and they wrote a great, powerful, emotional, fun story that was able to interest all these wonderful actors, and they framed it in a way that is unique and fresh but it keeps the essence of what *Speed Racer* was. So it has all that magic of the original and a whole new story."

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian (Walt Disney Pictures), opening in theaters on May 16, features the original cast and creative team from the first Narnia movie. *Prince Caspian* was originally the second book published in the series written by C.S. Lewis—at a later date, the books were published in a different order. The story takes place one year after *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* in our time. But in Narnia time, 1,300 years have passed. The Pevensie children transport from England back to a Narnia that lies in ruins, although its kings and queens have returned. The Pevensies are literally legends in Narnia time.

The problem is that although Prince Caspian is the rightful heir to the throne, his evil uncle Miraz now rules as king because he murdered Prince Caspian's father. The young prince must go into hiding because he's next on King Miraz's hit list. King Miraz is determined that his own son will rule as Narnia's next king, but for that to happen, Prince Caspian must die.

With the help of the Pevensie siblings, Prince Caspian raises an army of animals and magical creatures to fight King Miraz and the humans who have taken over Narnia.

The long-awaited **Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skulls** (Paramount Pictures) opens on May 22. Set in 1957, Indiana Jones squares off against the Cold War Russians, led by Cate Blanchett (*Elizabeth*). Karen Allen (*Starman*) returns as girlfriend Marion Ravenwood. According to speculation in a *Vanity Fair* article, Shia LaBeouf's (*Transformers*, *Disturbia*) role may be as the son of Indy and Marion.

Although life-size human skulls made of crystal are real in our world, there is a lot of debate about their origin. Some claim that they're artifacts of ancient Mayan culture, while others insist they date back no more than a couple of hundred years. There are several theories about the crystal skulls and their purpose, including skulls as ancient supercomputers and skulls as mystical objects used to peer into the future. At press time, there are few details about the movie's plot, although rumors speculate that Indy will be traveling to Central America and Area 51. □

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father disappears and the girl reaches out to Alex Rover, a reclusive author who travels across the world to try to get to the girl. Those elements are very much intact. We've created some new characters. We've changed the tone of the book. We've broadened its appeal from being a younger book to something that has a strong comedic role for Jodie Foster and probably has a broader family appeal."

While Alexandra races around the world trying to find Nim, the girl faces threats on her own. Nim endures tropical storms, but she also must figure out how to keep a tour boat that's trying to invade her island at bay. The same tour company was responsible for an accident that killed Nim's mother when Nim was just an infant.

It had immense resonance in the book," Flackett says about the death of Nim's mother. "I like to think we brought it even more to the forefront in the movie. When you see the movie, there's a real culmination. That story of the mother figures very deeply."

It's why Nim and her father live on their own island, secluded from the rest of the world. It's their safe place. And when the tourists threaten to invade, Nim sees that menace come to life in the form of the character Long John Silver from *Treasure Island*.

It's the most beautiful place in the world that is only theirs," says Flackett. "From the very beginning that is what sets the whole story in motion.

Levin adds. "Obviously we had to find an island and bring a volcano to this island—it's the magic of movies. If we drew a map of the movie *Nim's Island*, it would look slightly different from the map of the [island in the book], but it's similar in scale. It's small enough for Nim to feel that she knows every inch of it."

The filmmakers found a remote island located about an hour from the coast of Queensland, Australia. Their greatest challenge in making the movie was to squeeze in as much as possible.

"[It's about] making reality match your dreams," says Flackett. "We had big, big dreams for the movie, and you're always out against time—there never seems to be enough time. And somehow you make everything you wanted out of what you thought wasn't enough. I think that has been our greatest challenge to make it as big as we wanted it to be.

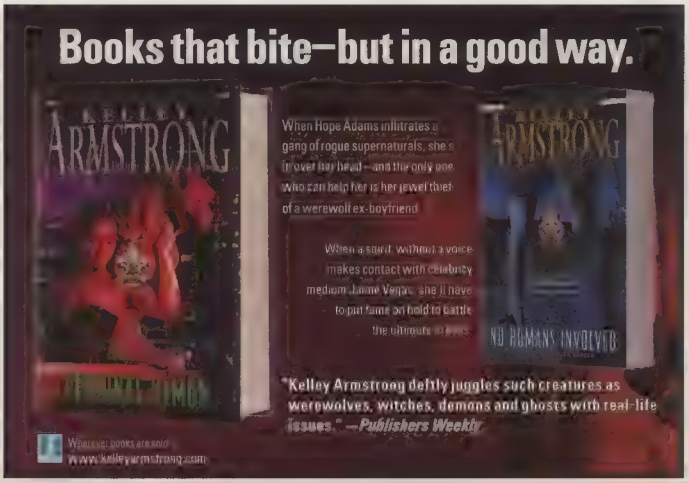
Levin adds, "In general, it has been a pleasant experience in that we had a vision for the movie and we were able to execute that vision and the cast, to be able to make it better than we dreamed. Everything is going swimmingly: the creatures, the visual effects, the feel of the island.

"And all the actors," Flackett says. "They all are fabulous. To be able to watch the performances every day—it's really great."

But what may be even more important to the filmmakers stems from their family life. "We're married and we've been working together for 12 years," Levin says.

"It's a fantastic life," Flackett says. "Our kids come with us. They had their own *Nim's Island* experience [in Australia while the film was shot]. It was a great family adventure. We have a little girl who's 8 and a little boy who's 4.

"[Our] little girl is a real heroine in our eyes. We don't have that many movies we can take her to where there is a hero who happens to be a girl. And that was really the first place where we said, 'It would be special to make something like that for her and for all girls and boys.' Because I do think that if you make a great character, it does transcend gender. And also the role of imagination and telling that kind of story about courage—we thought that was something we'd really like to put out in the world." ❧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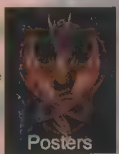

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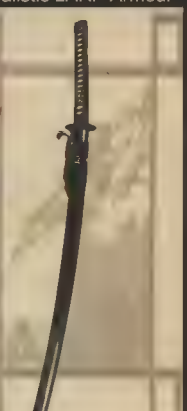

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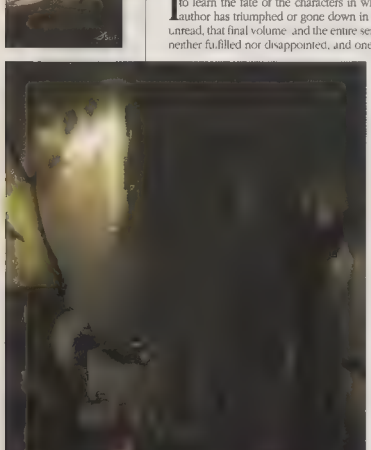
By Paul Witcover and Jeff VanderMeer

Paul Park's conclusion to the *Roumania Quartet* is a triumph.

If you're anything like me, the moment when you hold in your hands the final volume of a cherished series is a moment fraught with anxiety. Yes, you are eager to open the book and start reading, eager to learn the fate of the characters in whom you have become so invested, eager to find out if the author has triumphed or gone down in flames. And yet, you are hesitant to begin. Now, unopened, unread, that final volume, and the entire series itself, is a potential as yet unrealized, a tantalizing promise neither fulfilled nor disappointed, and one way or another, for better or worse, that is going to change forever once you start reading. Reread all you like, but you can't get back the innocence of an unread book. That is why the act of reading, like all protracted exercises in love, is both a loss of innocence and its obsessive pursuit.



Stephan Martiniere created this spectacular painting for the cover of Michael Swanwick's The Dragons of Babel, *reviewed in this issue*

The last volume in a series is also the author's last chance to surprise us. I don't mean in the sense of letting us down by dropping the ball and producing something that doesn't meet the standards of what has come before. I'm talking about ringing unexpected changes on elements of prior volumes in order to bring the series to a conclusion that is faithful to what has preceded it yet transforms our understanding of the characters and events we have been following. To me, this kind of conclusion is the best of all—and the hardest to pull off. Philip Pullman manages it, albeit messily, in *The Amber Spyglass*. And so, far more gracefully, does Paul Park, who wraps up his ***Roumania Quartet*** with ***The Hidden World*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp. $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1668-4).

An equally honorable way of ending a series is by rigorously elaborating its initial premises to their logical conclusions. This sounds mechanistic and cold, but it needn't be. I doubt anyone would apply those adjectives to *Lord of the Rings*, yet this is precisely the formula of Tolkien's great trilogy. There is ample room for surprises here as well, both because we may not grasp the full implications of the initial conditions until we see them worked out, and also because, if those initial conditions are sufficiently grim, we may doubt that the author has the integrity—or, if you prefer, heartlessness—to carry them all the way through. In ***Evil for Evil*** (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 704 pp. $12.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-00339-1) and ***The Escapement*** (Orbit, New York, trade paperback, 432 pp. $12.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-00340-1), the second and third volumes of her *Engineer Trilogy*, K.J. Parker combines artistry and heartlessness in relentlessly tightening the screws of what amounts to a literary torture device.

First let's look at *The Hidden World* (warning: some spoilers follow). I don't have sufficient superlatives to describe the extent of Park's accomplishment here, except to predict that, just as John Crowley did with *Little, Big*, Park has left a stamp on fantasy that will be profound and enduring. He took one of the most clichéd tropes in the genre, the sudden transportation of a group of children from the real world to a world of magic in which they are fated to play a central role in a struggle of timeless good against ancient evil, completely demolished it, and then put it back together into something rich and strange and, moreover, deeply relevant to our troubled times, in which leaders from Bush to bin Laden seem to have fallen under a spell that causes confusion as to the fundamental difference between what we wish for and what ineluctably is. In other words, between fantasy of the most puerile sort and adult reality, with all

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its grim but finally inescapable certainties. Park writes grown-up fantasy for real people, about real people, even if his main characters—Miranda, Peter, and Andromeda—are, or rather begin as, children. He is all about engagement, not escape.

In *The Hidden World*, these three friends—whose previous lives, along with the world in which those lives were lived (our world), have all been revealed as a grotesque fraud, a fantasy cobbled together on the cheap by Miranda's aunt Aegypta, a fanatical megalomaniac—have changed drastically from what they were. Miranda has become much older, literally in the blink of an eye. The same is true for Peter, who has fused uncomfortably back into his original identity, that of a brave but somewhat brutish soldier named Pieter de Grasz. And it is especially, tragically true for Andromeda, who has not only become older but turned into a kind of werewolf, and a transsexual besides, in imperfectly assuming her original identity of the dashing Sasha Prochenko.

Miranda's nemesis and Park's most sublime creation Nicola Ceausescu, was killed at the end of the previous volume, *The White Tyger*, but in Park's world death is no obstacle to action, and just as Aegypta returned from the dead in earlier volumes to help and hinder her niece, so now does Nicola return in all her appalling self-regard, to once again bestride the stage like a colossus, scarcely diminished by the lack of a body . which lack she remedies soon enough.

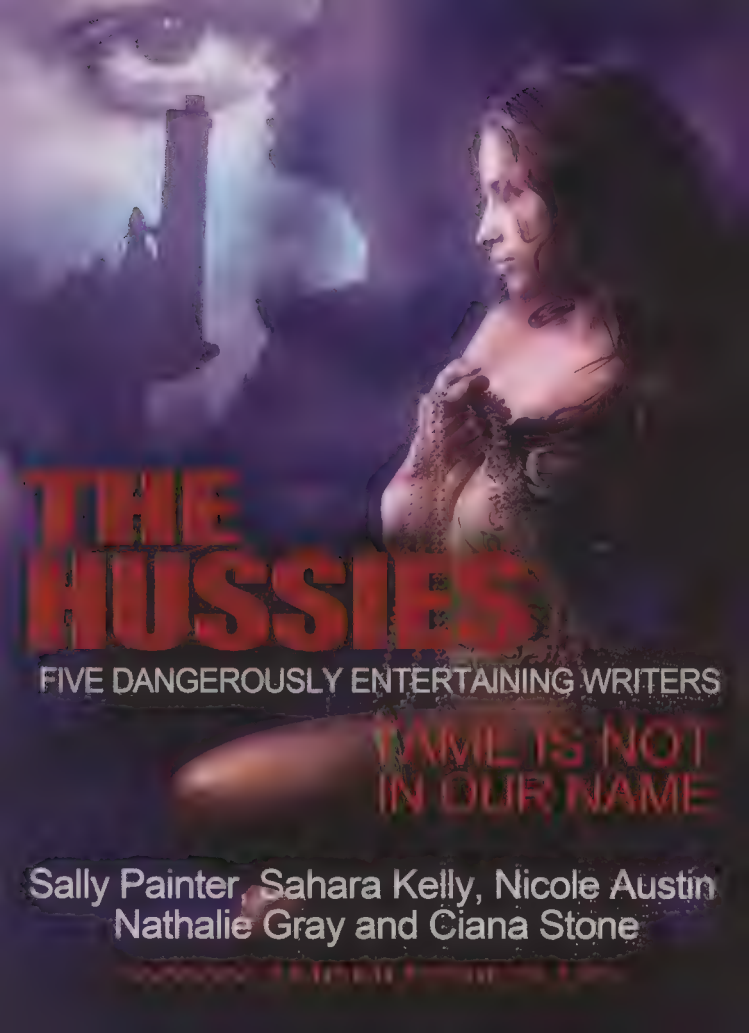
Meanwhile, a great war, modeled on the Great War of 1914-1918, is grinding on, and Pieter, to escape his confusing feelings for Miranda, has thrown himself into the bloodbath, while Sasha, tortured by her own conflicted feelings, and by guilts and desires her friends cannot imagine, pursues a dangerous dalliance with the young wife of Bocu, the chillingly insane dictator of Roumania.

At the same time, an analogous reality, or perhaps a superior one, lies below the surface, in the hidden world of the novel's title, a dimension of possibilities, of magical correspondences, that borders the land of the dead and may even include our world, the one destroyed in *A Princess of Roumania*, or the remnants of it. Miranda has access to this world via the Tourmaline, a jewel extracted from the skull of Johannes Kepler. Even as events and characters move toward a violent climax in the visible world, with the fate of Roumania and more at stake, events and characters in the hidden world move on sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting tracks. Love, in varieties pure and twisted, is the driving force, compelling Nicola's vainglorious, death-defying ambition as well as forcing Miranda and Pieter, and even Sasha, to acknowledge what binds them.

There is more, much more, to this intricately constructed and dazzlingly executed novel but I will leave the pleasures of further discovery to readers. I closed it emotionally wrung out, almost physically exhausted, with sadness and exhilaration in my heart. And with the certain knowledge that I would return to Park's Roumania not once but many times in the years to come.

My feelings at the conclusion of K.J. Parker's trilogy could not have been more different. In an earlier column, I raved about the first book in this series, *Devices and Desires*. *Evil for Evil* and *The Escapement* are, in themselves, just as crisply and intelligently written. Indeed, it's impossible not to acknowledge Parker's substantial triumph as artist and craftsperson in constructing the pitiless machine of her trilogy. Yet the series constitutes one of the grimmest reading experiences in my memory. I had to fight my way through the second and third books, and when I was done, my overwhelming feelings were relief and smoldering resentment. Why?

Monty Python provides the answer to this question, as to so many others. In "The Architect Sketch," John Cleese, playing an architect named Mr. Wiggin, outlines his proposal for a residential block of flats to an audience that realizes with dawning horror that he is describ-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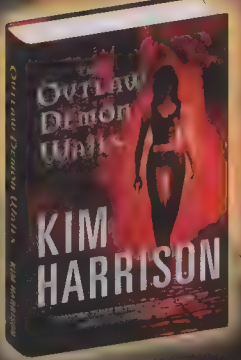

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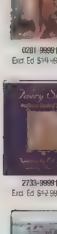

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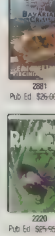

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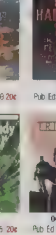

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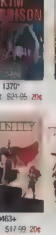

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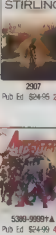

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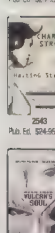

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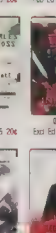

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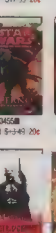

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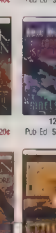

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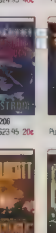

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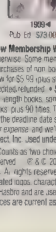

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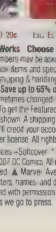

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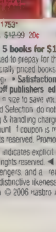

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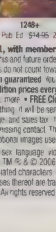

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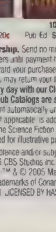

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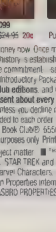

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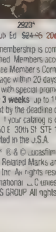

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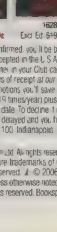

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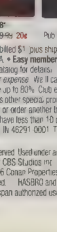

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Gods of Manhattan, by Scott Mebus, Dutton, April 2008. An ordinary boy and his little sister are drawn into a centuries-old struggle when Kory discovers he can see a hidden world, in which the Gods of Manhattan—people and spirits who've left their mark on history and society—influence events on a multitude of levels. Indian ghosts, talking roaches, historical figures, immortal teenagers, wizards, and assassins all come together as Kory is manipulated into ending an ancient wrong. Drawing from myth, urban legend, and actual history to create a thought-provoking world just beyond our own, *Gods of Manhattan* is a fantastic, imaginative start to a new series, and I'll be looking forward to future installments eagerly.

Hallowmere #2: By Venom's Sweet Sting, by Tiffany Trent, Mirrorstone, December 2007. With Folsion School destroyed, and two of the legendary rainstones Unhallowed Fey, the Council of Elaphe decides to take the fight to the Fey. And so Corrine, fiona, and Christina, as well as their teachers and allies, travel to Scotland, where they can continue their studies and learn more about their enemies. As Corrine explores her powers, the Fey find new ways of striking at her, on sea, on land, and in her dreams. Ultimately, she'll have to brave the heart of the Fey and face their Prince in a desperate attempt to balance things out. Tiffany Trent continues the Hallowmere series in this intriguing, atmospheric, dark fairy tale set on the high seas and in the moody moors of Scotland. My only complaint is that just when it gets good, it's over and I can hardly wait for the next installment.

The Sweet Far Thing, by Libba Bray, Delacorte Press, December 2007. With all the magical power of the mystical Realms at her fingertips, Gemma Doyle must struggle with the temp

or share it among the numerous factions demanding her coopera

friends must decide what to do with their lives, assuming they can challenge the roles society would force upon them. Questions are answered and futures resolved in this epic conclusion to a wonderfully-woven trilogy that injects magic and suspense into a Victorian setting. Libba Bray does a great job of balancing the mundane and the fantastic, and it's almost a shame to see the story end.

Sun and Moon, Ice and Snow, by Jessica Day George

woodcutter's daughter known only as "elfhe lass" agrees to spend a year in a castle of ice with a mysterious, magical white bear. Little does she realize that her attempts to delve into the secrets of the castle and its owner will bring her into a strange con

she'll need them when she's drawn into an epic scheme involving Odin, Loki, and the resurgence of the Norse gods. When Order and Chaos come together in a world-shattering, world-defining clash, Maddy Smith is the random factor who'll determine how it all plays out, once and for all. *Runemarks* takes the familiar elements of Norse myth, and turns them inside out to create an excellent epic fantasy full of memorable characters and nonstop adventure!

Neptune's Children, by Bonnie Dobkin, Walker Books, May 2008. After a biological weapon accidentally kills all of the adults on Earth, it's up to the children left behind to carry on. For thousands of children left orphaned and stranded in a popular theme park, it's a chance to build a new kind of paradise, protected from the unknown dangers of the outside world, and to create new families and new rules. But beset by problems both internal and external, the fledgling society lurches towards self

well come to them, granting them inhuman powers and chargin the three teens to fulfill the wishes represented by the coins, or else. As each wish they help grant takes a dark twist and people ge hurt, the three friends soon fin themselves at a crossroads, work ing at cross purposes. As the secrets of the well are revealed, R Ryan realizes he has to stop the wish-granting, but how do you fight what might be an ancient

ing and terrifying, cool and spooky, this is a dark look at what happens when an old magic can't cope with the modern age. Once again, Hardinge deliv ers a complex, captivat ing story.

Pandora Get-Jealous, by Carolyn Hennesy, Bloomsbury, January 2008. When a school show-and-tell project goes horribly

is opened and its con ents are released, unleashing a host of evils upon humanity. Blamed for the accident, 13-year-old Pandora is hauled before the Greek gods themselves to rectify the situation, and given six

ironation with all manner of magical beings, culminating in a battle of wills with a host of fiendish trolls. This is an enchanting, complex story that draws from several classic fairy tales and imbues them with a strong Nordic feel, managing to make the old and familiar seem fresh and new all over again. Jessica Day George succeeds in bringing authenticity to this historical fairy tale.

Runemarks, by Joanne Harris, Alfred A. Knopf, January 2008. Five hundred years after the death of the gods and the rise of the Order, magic is all but forgotten. However, Maddy Smith, born with a rune mark on her palm, under the tutelage of the mysterious One-Eye, discovers her own magical abilities over time. And

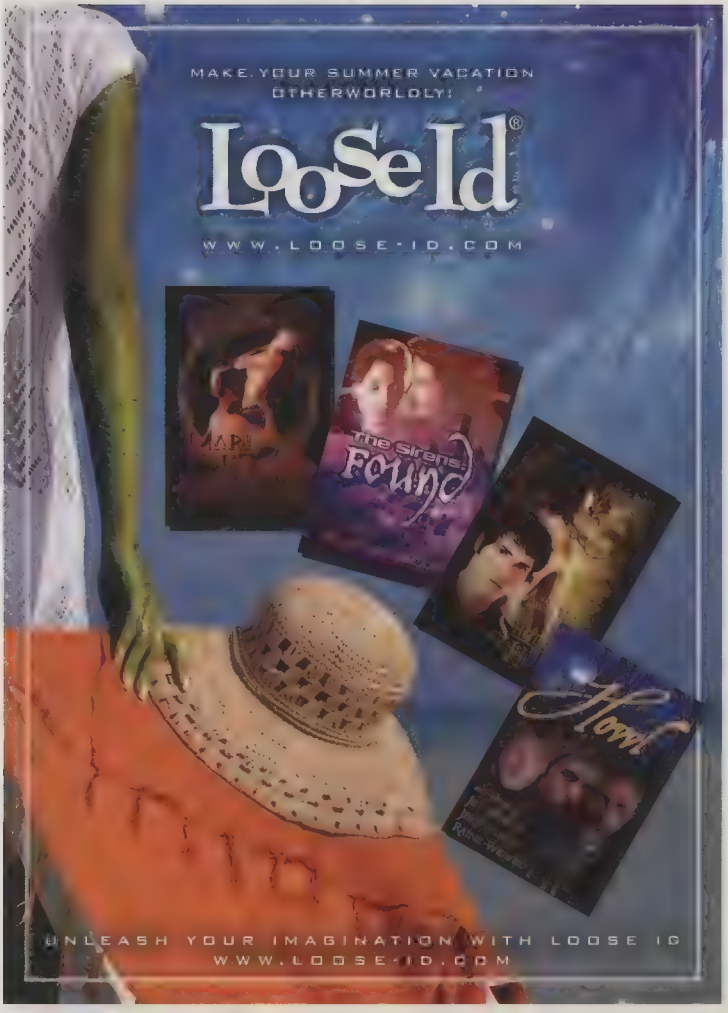
destruction, unless a few brave kids can stand up for what's right. Invoking a *Lord of the Flies* atmosphere in a Disney-like setting, *Neptune's Children* is a fast-paced, thought

vast storytelling appor tunities the concep broaden

months to track down the plague and return them to the box. Assisted by her best friends and

rom some of the more sympathetic immortals she embarks upon a

imbued with some modern teen sensibili ties, this is an amus ing, entertaining, light hearted (yet occasionally creepy) story fostering an irrepressible, spunky protagonist and a host of memorable supporting charac ters. It'll be interesting to watch Pandora's adventures in the books to come. ✦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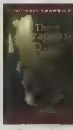
ing an amateur. "Do I take it you are proposing to slaughter our tenants?" asks one man. To which Wiggin answers, "Does that not fit in with your plans?" "Not really," comes the reply. "We asked for a simple block of flats." "Ah," says Wiggin. "I hadn't fully divined your attitude towards the tenants."



The *Engineer Trilogy* is a literary slaughterhouse. It is exceptionally well-designed, even beautiful, performing its function with efficiency and thoroughness. In its nearly two thousand pages, the elaborate scheme of an amoral engineering genius, Ziani Vaatzes, to be reunited with his faithless wife and vapid child results in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the destruction of least four kingdoms. The monomaniacal Vaatzes approaches his work with cold logic and undeviating devotion, coupled with smug superiority at the inferiors he is so easily manipulating. Despite his attachment to his wife and child, he is a thorough misanthrope. The author's attitude toward her characters seems equivalent, with an extra dash of misogyny thrown in, for her female characters are with a single exception faithless, shallow, and insipid . and that exception is punished for being otherwise.

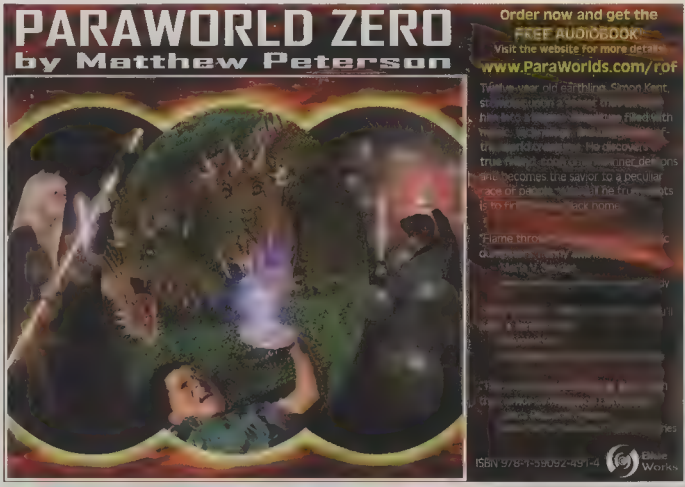
In retrospect, *Devices and Desires* captivated because it introduced the compelling characters that Parker would subsequently, for no apparent reason, grind down to blood and bone: the affably ineffective Duke Orsea, his loyal lieutenant, Miel Ducas, Orsea's wife, Veatriz; and Duke Valens, who loves Veatriz. A fascinating new character, a man who rivals Vaatzes in intellectual achievement and may even surpass him in moral turpitude, is the freakish genius Daurenja, who discovers gunpowder and seeks Vaatze's help in building the first cannon this world has seen. Daurenja reminded me of the Mule, the mental superman of Asimov's *Foundation* series. Where the Mule is physically decrepit, Daurenja is a superb athlete and warrior, yet they are alike in threat: Daurenja a vast plan that has taken everything into account save themselves. But Daurenja, too, proves mere fodder -cannon fodder.

These men and women are the raw materials out of which Vaatzes constructs his holocaust engine. The motive forces that drive the engine are love and loyalty and duty. The machine devours its own parts and reduces its motive forces to ash. Why? Because that is what it was designed to do. If there is a substantial difference between this device and the technical manual Parker has written to demonstrate it in action, I can't see it.

In a recent column, I reviewed Michael Swanwick's latest collection, *The Dog Said Bow-Wow*. Two of the best stories in that collection, "An Episode of Stardust" and "A Small Room in Koboldtown," are present as chapters, reworked to varying degrees, in his diverting new novel ***The Dragons of Babel*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp., $25.95, ISBN 978-0-7653-1950-0), a return to the world of his groundbreaking 1993 novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*. That novel featured Swanwick's brilliantly subversive fusing of cyberpunk attitude and style with traditional fantasy tropes and characters, fueled by an implacable hostility to the idea of fantasy as formulaic wish-fulfillment offering escape from adult responsibilities into a kind of perpetual childhood. It was, needless to add, a bit of a downer.

The Dragons of Babel is less bleak and angry than its iconoclastic predecessor, as if, in the intervening fourteen years, Swanwick has mellowed. Or maybe it's just that the rest of the genre has caught up with him at last, after all, the so-called New Weird movement coalesced around many of the same concerns that Swanwick had identified years earlier. Whatever the reason, *The Dragons of Babel*, while still plenty dark, and plenty critical of the unreflective adoption of such genre tropes as quests and prophecies, to name but two, has a lot of the jaunty lightheartedness of the fairy tales that are its models: tales in which innocent young persons go off to make their fortunes and, after trials and tribulations, win through to the destiny that was somehow theirs all along.

Of course, Swanwick being Swanwick, it's not quite as simple as that, and the question



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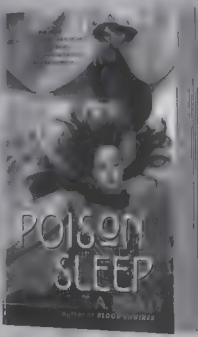

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of whether the brass ring of destiny is to be grabbed with both hands or rejected, and what the costs of either choice might be, both personally and for the wider world, looms large in these pages. *The Dragons of Babel* is all about choices and consequences.

Will le Fey is a young half-elf of dubious parentage with the misfortune to live between the warring kingdoms of Babel and Avalon. One day, a wounded war dragon, brought down by a basilisk, crawls into Will's village. The dragon is a cross between the mythical monster and a modern fighter jet, an eldritch cyborg "built with dwarven skill to high-elven design" and invested with a coldly amoral, if not downright evil, intelligence. The dragon takes over the village, chooses Will as its intermediary and compelling him to convey and enforce the dragon's commands, while each night sinking chilly coils of draconian intellect into his mind in order to access every thing Will has witnessed that day—in the process corrupting him in profound and lasting ways. When a homegrown resistance movement springs up, the dragon makes Will hunt down its leader, Puck Berrysnatcher. Will's bosom friend and an early casualty of the dragon's presence, who has undergone a mysterious rebirth that has made him into something less and more than he was. Now, thanks to Will, Puck is put to death.

Even though Will at last finds the strength to resist the dragon, and is instrumental in freeing the village, he is banished for his collaboration. Thrust into a world upended by war, haunted by guilt and by ghosts, Will experiences a series of seemingly chance encounters—most notably with an ageless girl child named Esme, and with a con man, con elf ... named Nat Whilk—that bring him to Babel, a vast tower of a city modeled on Manhattan—only with its various neighborhoods arranged vertically. Here, in adventures deep beneath the city and rising to its very apex, Will falls in love, joins Whilk in a scam of breathtaking audacity, fights to come to terms with his ghosts, and discovers secrets about his past that will lead him to a momentous decision about the future.

Readers will delight in Swanwick's inventiveness as he brings Babel to life, demonstrating the same inspired genius at conflating technology and magic, gritty realism and polished fantasy, that powered *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*. This novel is full of set pieces that rise to the level of tours de force, including a climactic episode that incorporates still raw memories of 9/11 to hair-raising effect. The only flaw here—and others might not find it so—is Swanwick's reliance on previously published material. In addition to the two short stories mentioned earlier, he shoehorns in another four: "King Dragon," "The Word

GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

The Museum Vaults, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, Nantier Beall Minoustchine, New York, trade paperback, 60 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-56163-514-6. The second in a series of museum-based graphic novels co-sponsored by the Louvre Museum in Paris, *The Museum Vaults* describes the adventures of an architect assessor in a strange museum so large that people have gotten lost inside of it. In one section, workers have been placing together the fragments of a giant stone eye for years; in another, employees sleep inside of sarcophagi. Creepy and at times humorous, the book has great appeal to fans of fantasy. Rendered in rich black-and-brown tones, this surreal follow-up to Nicolas De Crecy's amazing *Glacial Period* bodes well for the Louvre series as a whole.

Age of Bronze: Betrayal, Part One, Eric Shanower, Image Comics, San Diego, CA, hardcover, 96 pp. 176, $27.99, ISBN: 978-58240-545-3. Continuing one man's quest to detail all of ancient history's greatest legends in comics form, Eric Shanower returns with a complex, fascinating view of the Trojan War in *Age of Bronze: Betrayal*. You'll find all of your old favorites, like Achilles, Odysseus, and Helen, in Shanower's version, rendered in detailed etching-like black-and-white illustrations. What strikes me as most impressive is how he has managed to make the story seem so effortless, despite its labyrinthine plot twists. The list of characters' names and descriptions, along with a copious bibliography of research materials, demonstrates how difficult it was to create such a seamless vision.

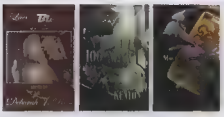
The Dreamland Chronicles: Books 1 and 2, Scott Christian Sava, Blue Dream Studios, Los Angeles, CA, trade paperback, 300/272 pp., $19.95 each, ISBN: 0/978-0978978168-3. Using the same animation style as *Toy Story* and *Shrek*, these graphic novels tell the adventures of Alexander Carter, a kid who has discovered a key into dreamland. Dreamland is full of [illegible] creatures both friendly and unfriendly, and his friends. However, the gorgeous, often subtle art in this new version is nothing

The Nightmare Factory: Based on the Stories of Thomas Ligotti, Various Authors, Fox Atomic Comics, New York, trade paperback, 112 pp., $17.99, ISBN: 978-006-124353-0. Thomas Ligotti might be one of our best supernatural fiction writers, so it's exciting to see some of his classic stories rendered in comics form by a host of amazing artists. Chief among these creators is Bernie Wrightson, the master emphasmith, the marvelous artist behind *30 Days of Night* and *Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse*. Released in 2007, this one somehow fell under my radar, but it is still available and I highly recommend it.

The Wind in the Willows, Kenneth Grahame and Michel Plessix, Papercutz, New York, trade paperback, 144 pp., $13.95, ISBN: 978-1-59707-0963. I never thought I'd be recommending a graphic novel edition of one of my favorite childhood books, but I am. The original *The Wind in the Willows* had charming illustrations that are forever hardwired into my memories of load

That Sings the Scythe," "An Episode of Moondust," and "Lord Weary's Empire." These too are changed from their original appearance revised to fit snugly into the plot and thematic structure of the novel. Yet even so, I felt that Swanwick's reliance on building his novel out of short stories gave the book an episodic character that detracted from the sense of organic wholeness that even a picaresque bildungsroman—which this undoubtedly is—should possess. But this may well be an overreaction on my part, based on a familiarity with the original stones that the majority of readers will not possess

Last up, a sparkling anthology edited by Deborah J. Ross: ***Lace and Blade*** (Leda Books, Winnetka, CA, trade paperback, 308 pp., $11.95, ISBN: 978-1-934169-91-9). As the title implies, these nine original fantasies bring romance and feminism into the sword and sorcery subgenre. There is something of the brash and jokey Chicks in Chainmail model, but more is owed to the elegantly witty fantasy of manners pioneered by Ellen Kushner. In fact, with its deft plot twists and transgressive elements, "Virtue and the Archangel," by Madeleine E. Robins, might almost have been penned by Kushner herself. Other standouts include "The Beheaded Queen," by David Smeds, whose main character is a severed head, Chaz Brenchley's "In the Night Street Baths," in which a young eunuch learns a lesson about loyalties and love; and "Lace-maker,



Blade-taker, Grave-breaker, Priest," by the great Tanith Lee, wherein a shipboard quarrel between two dandies takes an unforeseen turn after a shipwreck maroons them on a desolate shore

Paul Witcover

A World Too Near, Kay Kenyon, Pyr, Amherst, NY, hardcover, 456 pp., $25.00, ISBN 978-1 59102 642 6

The second book in Kay Kenyon's *The Entire and the Rose* series continues the promise shown in book one, *Bright of the Sky*, a favorite of mine last year. The Entire is a marvelous parallel universe that includes a galaxy-spanning river and is populated by any number of amazing people and creatures. The Rose is the name given by The Entire to our universe. The tension in this series revolves around the character of Titus Quinn, who entered The Entire when his spaceship malfunctioned. The first book was largely given over to the adventures of Quinn's daughter, while this volume details the exploits of Titus himself, who must destroy the fortress of Ahnenhoon before it consumes the "real" universe. In the process he must evade assassins sent by his own daughter, while his wife is held prisoner. The details of Quinn's quest make for stunning adventure fiction, while the mysteries revealed about The Entire are completely mind-blowing. Technically, this is science fiction because it's set in the future, but more than anything it is epic fantasy and world-building on a grand scale. It would be criminal if this novel didn't make year's best lists at the end of 2008

The Magician and the Fool, Barth Anderson, Bantam Spectra, New York, trade paperback, 288 pp., $13.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-38359-1

Taking a one-eighty swerve away from the thriller fiction of his first novel, *Patron Saint of Plagues*, Barth Anderson delivers a moody and mysterious take on the tarot deck in *The Magician and the Fool*. Mixing fantasy, historical fiction, and an ancient mystery, Anderson tells the story of Jeremiah Rosemont, who abandoned his academic studies in favor of exile and solitude in South America. However, his studies quickly catch up with him and he has to go on the run. The only thing that may save him is finding out the true secret behind the priestess, the magician, the hanged man, and the fool in the tarot deck—a secret dating back to the fall of Troy. Anderson does a great job of making Rosemont believable both as scholar and fugitive, while other characters

like Boy King, a homeless man, are also sharply rendered. The sense of menace and intrigue hanging over this novel give it the urgency of an airport page-turner, but it's much more sophisticated than that

The Bone Key, Sarah Monette, Prime Books, Rockville, MD, 253 pp., trade paperback, $12.95, ISBN 978-0-8095-5777-6

Sarah Monette may be familiar to *Realms of Fantasy* readers from her series of novels set in the fantasy city of Melusine, but she is also an accomplished short story writer. *The Bone Key* collects all of her Kyle Murchison Booth stories—basically supernatural tales inspired by the work of M.R. James and H.P. Lovecraft. Booth is a museum archivist who can see ghosts, ghouls, and incubi. He's a reluctant supernatural detective, in a sense, more interested in old books and his museum work. The tales Monette spins here are clever, creepy, and full of atmosphere. Evocative titles like "Elegy for a Demon Lover," "The Green Glass Paperweight," and "Drowning Palmer" only hint at the many old-fashioned pleasures provided by Monette. Even better, in what they reveal about Booth, these tales come across more like a mosaic novel than like a short story collection. This is exactly the kind of book that makes you want to turn off the TV, curl up on a dark night with a cup of hot chocolate, and just read

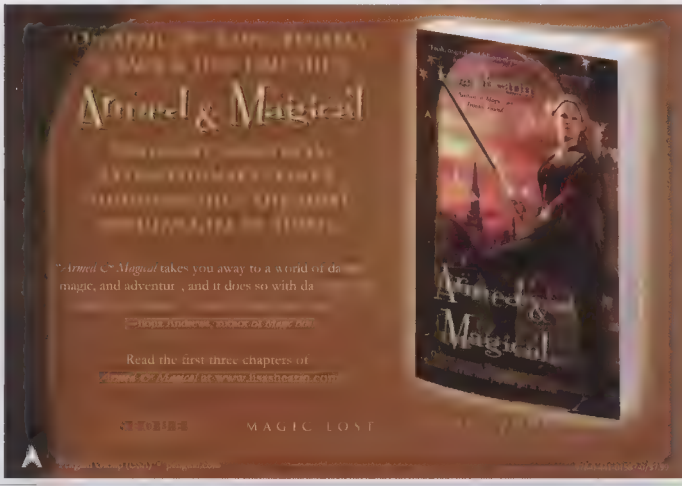
Inferno, Ellen Datlow (ed.), Tor Books, New York, 381 pp., hardcover, $25.95, ISBN 978-0-7653-1558-8

On the heels of the excellent folktale-based *Coyote Road*, editor Ellen Datlow offers up an infernal *Inferno* of horror tales by a host of new and established writers. It's this mix that gives the anthology its strength, with many of the best stories coming from writers like Nathan Ballingrud who do not yet have books out. Ballingrud's "The Monsters of Heaven" is a ferocious, uncompromising story about a man's relationship with his wife and son, which also involves angels. The characterization is first-rate, the situation harrowing. Ballingrud gets to the heart of Datlow's focus for the anthology of "a moment of dread so powerful it might cause the reader outright physical discomfort." That directive can take radically different forms, and Datlow does a good job of balancing avant garde fare like "The Monsters of Heaven" with more satisfyingly traditional tales. Stories by Laird Barron, Mike O'Driscoll, Lucius Shepard, Conrad Williams, and Jeffrey Ford provide further evidence for *Inferno* being one of the best horror anthologies since the classic *Prime Evil*.

Before They Are Hanged, Joe Abercrombie, Pyr, Amherst, NY, trade paperback, 448 pp., $15.00, ISBN 978-1-59102-641-9

Besides Steven Erikson, nobody writes grittier heroic fantasy that Joe Abercrombie, and the second book in his *The First Law* series just proves the point in spades. How do you ramp up the tension? Maybe by making one of your protagonists, Superior Glokta, responsible for a city facing internal and external threats galore. Maybe by making the defending army one of the worst in the world. Maybe by including a quest into potential disaster by a bunch of oddballs. Or perhaps you do it by including all of these elements and throw in a kicker in the form of vile Eaters that threaten humankind. Then you bring it all to a boil. I'm especially enamored of how Abercrombie manages to write immense battle scenes while also getting across the grimness and unexpected humor of more personal moments. The efforts of Glokta against the odds are compelling, while the dogged Dog Man and others seem just as real. When Abercrombie's characters rise for glory, you might as well be there with them, he does such a good job of putting the reader in the scene. Immediate, daring, and utterly entertaining, this second book provides evidence that Abercrombie is headed for superstar status.

Jeff VanderMeer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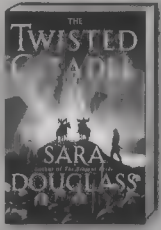

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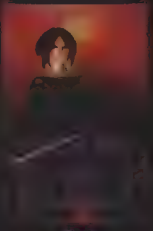

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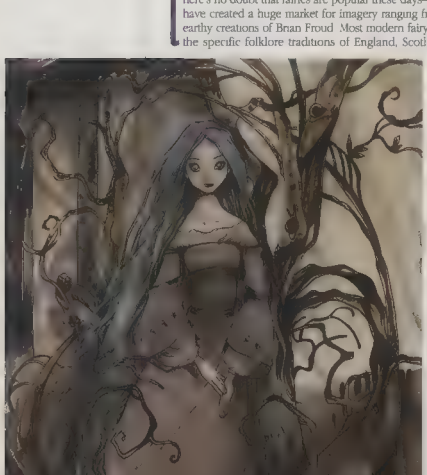
By Raffaella Benvenuto & Theodora Goss

Beyond the Fields We Know: The Fairy Lore of Italy and Hungary

There's no doubt that fairies are popular these days—particularly among legions of teenage girls who have created a huge market for imagery ranging from the winged nymphets of Amy Brown to the earthy creations of Brian Froud. Most modern fairy art (as well as modern fairy fiction) is rooted in the specific folklore traditions of England, Scotland, and Ireland—not only because these are extremely rich traditions, but also because they are most familiar. This obscures the fact that all the countries of Europe have indigenous fairy populations, both like and unlike those of the British Isles. For this article, I've asked an Italian fantasy scholar and a Hungarian born fantasy writer to tell us about the faines that live in lands "beyond the fields we know" (to borrow Lord Dunsany's famous phrase). If you'd like to know more about other fairies around the world, I recommend Anna Franklin's informative book, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Faines*.

Tem Windling (editor of the Folkroots column)



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One of the most popular fairy figures in modern Italian literature is the Fata Turchina *from* Pinocchio. *Natalia Pierandrei created this illustration especially for this column.*

Part I: Fate, Folletti, and Other Creatures of Italian Legend, by Raffaella Benvenuto

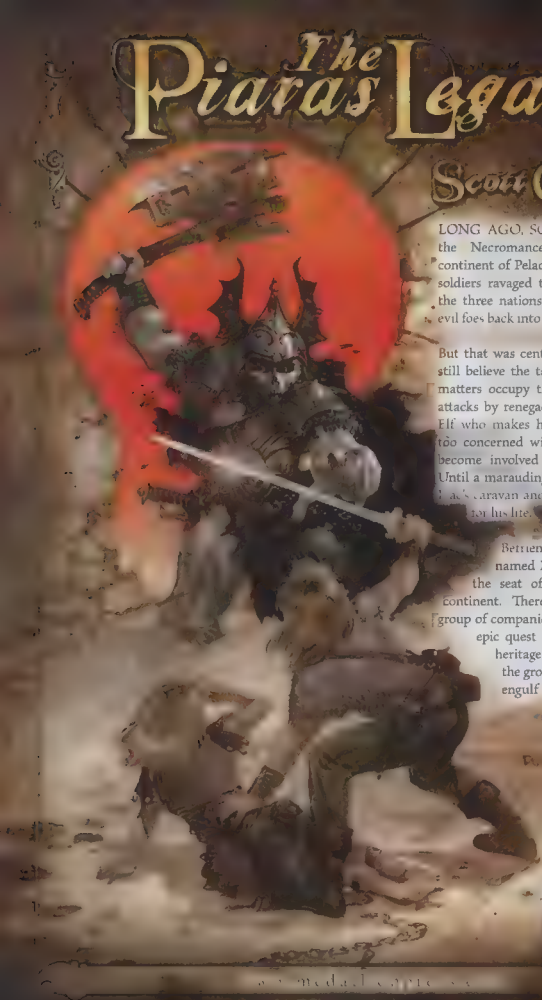
Though a relatively small country, Italy boasts a very rich folklore heritage, as diverse as the regions comprising its territory. All of these possess distinctive traditions as concerns fairies and other kinds of legendary beings, which are a prominent feature of Italian folk tales.

Interestingly, Italy was also the birthplace of the literary fairy tale (*Kunstmärchen*), which had its origin in the works of Gian Francesco Straparola (*Le Piacevoli Notti*, 1550–1553) and Giambattista Basile (the *Pentamerone*, or *Cunto de li Cunti*, 1643–1646). Both collections of fantastic tales were based on the rich oral tradition of the authors' respective regions (Veneto for Straparola and Naples for Basile), though substantially adapted to appeal to court audiences in the late Renaissance and Baroque periods. These two works can be rightfully considered as the forerunners of literary fairy tales, from Charles Perrault to Hans Christian Andersen and beyond. By the 19th century, many folklorists and researchers had started collecting folk tales from oral sources of every Italian region and putting them into writing to make them available for study and general consumption. However, in spite of the wealth of material at hand, for a long time Italy lacked a true equivalent of the Brothers Grimm's monumental German fairy tale collection— although, in 1956, the publication of Italo Calvino's seminal, three-volume collection of *Fiabe italiane* came to fill that void and provide definitive versions of some of the most popular Italian fairy tales.

Because of Italy's long, variegated, often troubled history, its folklore shows highly individual, distinctive features depending on the historical and cultural influences that have emerged in its various areas throughout the centuries. Therefore, northeastern regions such as Trentino and the partly German-

The Piaras Legacy

Scott Gamboe



LONG AGO, SO THE LEGENDS SAY the Necromancer Volnor invaded the continent of Pelacia. His legions of undead soldiers ravaged the land unchecked, until the three nations united and pushed their evil foes back into the Desert of Malator.

But that was centuries ago, and few people still believe the tale. Other, more worldly matters occupy their time, such as recent attacks by renegade Kobolds. But Elac, an Elf who makes his way as a merchant, is too concerned with his business affairs to become involved in international politics. Until a marauding band of Kobolds attacks his caravan and he finds himself running for his life.

Befriended by an Elven warrior named Rilen, he travels to Unity, the seat of power on the Pelacian continent. There he is joined by a diverse group of companions, and he sets out on an epic quest to solve the riddle of his heritage and save the land from the growing evil that threatens to engulf it.

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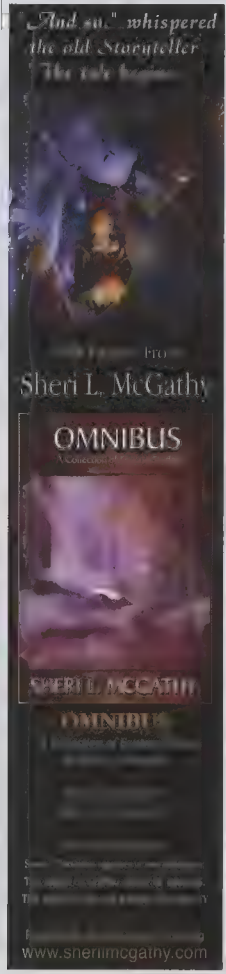

speaking Alto Adige, or Südtirol, were obviously influenced by the traditions of the neighboring Germanic countries, while in the southern regions the significant Greco-Roman influence blended with a fascinating, often obscure background harking back to pre-Roman times. It can also be observed that fairy like creatures are more frequently encountered in the north and south, in those parts of the country less subject to urbanization and therefore more in touch with their ancient cultural roots. As a matter of fact, mountain areas, both in the northern Alpine regions and in the Apennine range that forms the backbone of the Italian peninsula, seem to possess an especially rich, varied body of lore. Italian folklore abounds in both fairies and other spirits, known by a multitude of local names as fascinating as their origins. Still rather widespread up to the years immediately following World War II, popular belief in such creatures survived alongside the belief in supernatural beings directly derived from the country's ever-present Catholic background, such as devils and angels. However, most Italian folk and fairy tales are concerned with *fate* (*fées* in French), a southern European version of the fairies of English and Celtic tradition, though a very distinctive one.

Just like its English and French counterparts, the Italian word *fata* comes from Latin *Fatae*, which is the feminine form of *Fatum*, "fate, destiny." This was another name for the three divine sisters, Clotho, Lachesis, and Athropos, called *Moirae* in Greek and *Parcae* in Latin, who presided over the fate of human beings, spinning the thread of life and eventually cutting it. *Fate* are likewise supernatural beings, possessed of equally supernatural powers—though their human appearance can often deceive the protagonists of fairy tales and lead them to committing near-fatal mistakes. Both their powers and their appearance are inherited from such characters of classical mythology as the above-mentioned *Parcae* (called in English the Three Fates) and the nymphs that inhabit woods, caves, rivers, and sources. Like the latter, *fate* are often (though not always) nature spirits, like the *Parcae*, they can preside over the fate of their godchildren, handing out virtues or vices to them according to the situation. They are also all female: in Italian folklore there is no equivalent of the English King of Fairies, like Oberon in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The first *fate* appeared in both the literary and folk traditions of the late Middle Ages, being a particularly important feature of verse romances. Popular imagery depicts them as beautiful, elegant ladies, wearing *hennin* (tall, cone-shaped hats) and long gowns in the style worn in the European courts of the 15th century. The magic wand was added at a later stage as one of their essential attributes—like the one wielded by the sorceress Circe in *The Odyssey*, who was undoubtedly one of their most important literary ancestors. Over the years, this depiction became so popular that many Italian young girls still like to wear fairy costumes for Carnival, complete with those distinctive hats. This image, characteristic of French and Italian fairies, is often associated with the color blue—as shown by one of the most popular fairy figures in modern Italian literature, the *Fata Turchina* (the "Fairy with indigo hair" in the English translation) in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*.

Unlike their English and Celtic counterparts, in most cases *fate* are not diminutive, but rather they are regal and positively awe-inspiring. In fact, their appearance, especially as regards their otherworldly beauty, often conveys the strength of their power. Although generally of human appearance (and never winged), they can nonetheless alter their size to live in plants or even in fruits, like in Basile's *La mortella* ("The Myrtle") or Calvino's *L'amore delle tre melagrane* ("The Three Pomegranates"). While English and Celtic fairies are retiring and prefer to remain invisible to the human eye, *fate* are interested in people and do not purposely avoid interaction with them. As a matter of fact, encounters between *fate* and human beings often end in marriage: the motif of the union between a fairy and a man is extremely common both in oral and literary fairy tales originating from Italy, as can be seen from both Basile's and Calvino's collections.

As stated above, *fate* are almost always described as preternaturally beautiful, often golden-haired, slender, and pale-skinned. Though they are usually good-hearted, they can also be vain and easily offended—hence the numerous fairy tale instances of characters punished for a supposed, often unintended slight. When the author of the slight is the fairy's husband (usually because he boasted about his wife to other people), the *fata*'s revenge usually involves her leaving the man and forcing him to search for her far and wide. One such example is the tale of *Liombruno*, included in Calvino's collection and based on a medieval verse romance, in which the protagonist is saved from the Devil by the intervention of the beautiful Fata Aquilina. The two eventually marry; but, when Liombruno breaks his promise to his wife not to reveal her true identity, he is forced to embark on a perilous journey to find her and win back her love.

Both in folk and literary fairy tales, *fate* often have the task of acting as guardian angels, usually of children or young men and women to whom they dispense their benefits (called by Giambattista Basile *fatagioni*, or "enchantments"). Therefore, they often go by the name of *comari* (a dialectal word from southern Italy meaning "godmother") who look after the welfare of their godchildren. In some instances, it is the parents themselves who commit their child to the protection of a fairy; in others, the *fata* herself decides to take someone under her wing in exchange for some kindness received when in disguise, usually as a beggar or old woman. Unlike

witches, fairies are born with their powers the former can only acquire magical powers through study or other means, such as consorting with the Devil On the other hand, the distinction between *fate* and witches is not always very clear-cut, since in the Italian fairy tale tradition there are evil fairies who cast curses and evil spells, and kind-hearted witches who are ready to aid humans

Fate are very long-lived, to all intents and purposes immortal. When their lives come to an end, they do not actually die as human beings do, but rather retire to their palaces and remain there until the end of days. In a number of fairy tales, such as Basile's *La mortella* ("The Myrtle"), *fate* are subjected to a gruesome death, but eventually resurrected No one really knows where they come from, although there are many hypotheses as to their origin—such as that they may be spontaneously generated by nature, or that they may have a common mother, like a kind of queen bee. According to various literary sources, such as Calvino or Basile, they often live in underground palaces, only accessible by carefully chosen people and provided with every possible luxury. Though sometimes *fate* end up marrying humans, their children rarely inherit their magic powers, which include the ability to choose any appearance—human animal, or even vegetable—in which to show themselves to humans As a matter of fact, the ability to transform is one of the most important features of *fate* Fairies who are strongly characterized as nature spirits can easily turn into animals such as otters or water snakes, or into various kinds of trees and plants

Courtesy by Sotheby's Auctions, c. 1888

Fata are always described as preternaturally beautiful, golden-haired, slender, and pale-skinned.

There are still a number of Italian place names that contain references to *fate*, thus bearing witness to the importance of folklore in the naming of various features of the landscape. A mountain lake in the western Alps, near the Monte Rosa, is called *Lago delle Fate* ("Fairy Lake") A hill in the Abruzzi region of central Italy bears the name of *Colle delle Fate* ("Fairy Hill"), while a cave in the same region is called *Grotta delle Fate* ("Fairy Cave"). In the Monti Ausoni range of southern Lazio there is a peak called *Monte delle Fate* ("Fairy Mountain"). According to legend, in some areas of northern Tuscany, during the winter season fairies retire to spin and weave in underground caves called *buche delle fate* ("fairy holes"). Another mainly southern Italian tradition associates *fate* with ordinary human dwellings. in fact, every house possesses its own *fata* who can manifest herself in various ways, usually protecting or even helping the members of the family according to their merits

Lakes, streams, and waterfalls are often associated with fairies and other magical creatures, and this clearly bears out the connection between *fate* and the nymphs of Greco-Roman mythology. In mountain regions, which are undoubtedly one of the most remarkable features of the Italian territory, such legends seem to be particularly plentiful —as it is undoubtedly the case of the area around the Dolomites, a spectacularly beautiful, rose-hued mountain range found in northeastern Italy, in the easternmost part of the Alps, and locally called *monti pallidi* ("the

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pale mountains"). In this densely wooded region, full of streams and scenic lakes, the Germanic influence merged with the beliefs of the Rhaeto-Romanic speaking native population to produce an intriguing number of supernatural beings, some of them peculiar to specific areas.

The legendary creatures of the Dolomites region are at times reminiscent of pagan deities, like the *Sambiana*, the Winter Queen, who lives on various mountain peaks; at other times, instead, they take the appearance of sinister beings such as the sorcerer *Spina de Mul* ("Mule's Skeleton"), or the incubus-like Trude. The woods, meadows, and high peaks of the Dolomites are also inhabited by wild, hairy, man-like creatures called *Salvani* (a local variation on the widespread Wild Man theme), whose female counterparts are called *Bregostane*, the latter being sometimes characterized as ogre-like, man-eating, and child stealing. Lakes and streams house beautiful, alluring, nymph-like female spirits called *vivene* or *anguane*, common to other regions of northern Italy. These are sort of freshwater mermaids (the name *anguana* is a corruption of *aquana*, derived from the Italian word *acqua*, "water") who are sometimes said to be goat-footed as well—thus being another frequent feature of *fate* that suggests a connection with pagan beliefs, or even with the Devil. In folk tales and legends, *anguane* often marry mortals who are obliged to respect their prescriptions, any breach of promise resulting in the anguana leaving her husband and children forever.

Illustration by Warwick Goble, 1910

Like fairies, Hungarian 'fair ladies' steal children. They are beautiful and they sing as they fly. They are capable of transforming themselves into animals or humans or becoming invisible.

On the island of Sardinia, isolated from the mainland not only in a geographical sense, the local fairies are oddly reminiscent of their Celtic equivalents. Diminutive (about one foot tall) and white-skinned, the *janas* live in underground caves—though the Sardinian *domus de janas* (literally "fairy houses") are actually prehistoric burial grounds. They only go out at night to prevent the sun from burning their skin, which can also become luminous when they have to move about on moonless nights. *Janas* specialize in weaving the finest, most beautiful fabrics, as well as in baking delicious, wafer-thin bread, for these purposes they use gold looms and silver sieves. They are also said to accompany their work with the sweetest, most beautiful singing, which can sometimes be heard from afar. Like other kinds of fairies, they possess treasures of gold, silver, and jewels, guarded by horrible, insect-like creatures called *muscas maceddas* that hide in the treasure chests, ready to attack any would-be thieves. According to some tales, if the treasure of the *janas* is stolen, it quickly changes into coals and ashes in the hands of the thief. As distinctive in its own way as that of border regions like Alto Adige or Val d'Aosta, and infused with pre-Roman, pre-Christian influences, Sardinian folklore includes other sorts of female creatures, some quite sinister as well, like the local equivalent of the Three Fates, *sa filonzana* ("the spinner"), or the vampire-like *sùrbiles*.

According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, fairies seem to have originally been emanations of the Earth Mother that subsequently became water and vegetation spirits, appearing frequently on mountains, in woods or forests, or near water-courses. This is particularly true of those areas of the Italian territory where medieval legends merged with a rich tradition of pre-Christian belief in all sorts of spirits, which produced a myriad of different magical creatures not only *fate*, but also the diminutive beings usually called *folletti*, the Italian counterparts of the various sprites, gnomes, leprechauns, and pixies encountered in the folklore of western and northern European countries. Unfortunately, references to this vast body of lore can be fragmentary and quite difficult to find outside the writings of folklorists or anthropologists or the occasional collection of folk tales gathered directly from oral sources, since modern life seems to have eradicated most of those beliefs from people's minds.

However, a very interesting reference to these beliefs can be found in a book that has very little real connection with fairy tales or fantasy literature in general. Carlo Levi's autobiographical novel *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945), one of the best-known examples of modern Italian literature, contains a lengthy, detailed description of the beliefs of the peasants of the Basilicata region in southern Italy. The title of the book refers to the strong pagan undercurrents present in this once forsaken, still disadvantaged area of the country. In what amounts to almost a whole chapter, Levi describes impish, mischievous earth spirits called *monachicchi* (literally "little monks") who were believed to be the souls of children dead before being christened, and therefore fated never to find rest on this earth. Like most spirits of the type, *monachicchi* are tiny, extremely lively, and wear red hoods; they also stand guard over a treasure (usually a pot of gold), and exact revenge on anyone trying to steal it by turning the gold into lumps of coal.

Spirits similar to the *monachicchi* can be found in most parts of southern Italy, their names being basically variations of the "little monk" concept: for instance, the *munacielli* in Naples and *monachielli* (or *munachidd*) in Calabria. In other rural areas of the south, male *folletti* sometimes appear in folk tales as snakes or other animals with strong connections to the earth, representing a kind of father figure for the protagonists who helps them to attain their goals—as in the Apulian tale *Le palle d'oro* ("The Golden Balls"). Another tale from the same region, *Il folletto aggiustatutto* ("The Folletto That Can Fix Everything"), sees a benevolent house spirit called the *Lauru* help a young prince win his bride.

In the Italian language, the name *folletti* is a diminutive form of the adjective *folle*, meaning "mad," which emphasizes the mischievous, sometimes outright disruptive nature of these beings. As to their origins, one theory maintains that they derive from the Roman *Penati*, the gods of home and hearth; however, they might be even older, coming from the mythology of the Celtic populations that inhabited several parts of Italy before the Roman conquest. There are numerous types of *folletti*, all having very picturesque names, most of them love to play tricks on humans, though very few of them are really malicious. However, there are several instances of *folletti* that recall demon-like beings like incubi rather than mischievous, but ultimately harmless sprites. An example is the *Mazapegol* of the northeastern, coastal region of Romagna (formerly inhabited by Celts), described by

folkloristas as a cross between a goblin and an incubus. These hairy, monkey-like, malicious imps, which wear red caps as many other kinds of *folletti* are wont to do, love to get into bed with young, attractive women, squatting on their bellies and causing them to have nightmares. However, a woman can banish them by starting to behave in a disgusting way (like eating bread while defousing herself) which will drive the creatures away for good.

Dwarf like, underground-dwelling beings harking back to the traditions of northern European countries, are to be found in the folklore of Alto Adige, though they are missing in those parts of the country that possess a different cultural background. Some of these creatures are called *Ometti* (literally "little men") created by God to mine and work the immense riches contained by the mountains. Physically, they look like humans, though, as their name says, they are much smaller. They can only be seen in those places where gold, silver, and other precious materials abound and their presence is considered good luck by those who see them. Like the various kinds of *monachielli* from southern Italy, they are also dressed in monks' robes when they work, which leads them to be called *Monaci della Montagna* ("mountain's monks"); they can be playful, especially toward miners, but never intentionally malicious. Other dwarf like creatures from the same geographical area are the *Eismandl*, or *Nani dei Ghiaccio* ("ice dwarfs"), who look like bearded old men wearing broad brimmed hats; they live in glacier tunnels, where they guard fabulous treasures. The mythical Dwarfs of the Rosengarten (one of the most beautiful peaks of the Dolomites range, called Catinaccio in Italian) and their king Laurin share many of these features. The German name of the mountain has its origins in the legend of the magnificent rose garden guarding the entrance to the Dwarfs' realm and their treasures. Though Laurin turned the garden to stone to make it invisible to the eyes of men, his spell did not cover the hour of sunset, when the bare rock walls of the mountain turn a wonderful, deep rose color.

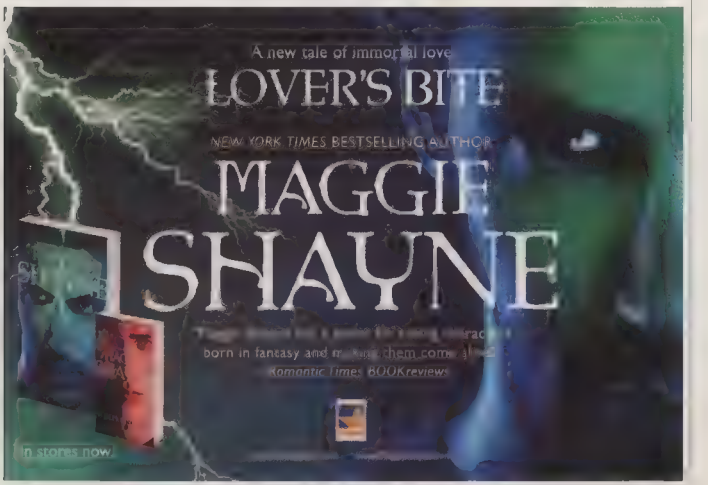
This overview is but a glimpse at the rich subject of fate and other magical beings in Italian folklore, for a proper treatise of this topic could fill the space of a entire book.

Part II: Tündér, Szépasszony, and Other Creatures of Hungarian Legend

by Theodora Goss

In his essay "On Fairy Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien tells us that fairy tales about the doings of fairies are "relatively rare, and as a rule not very interesting." This may be true of the Western European fairy tales with which Tolkien was most familiar, but it is not true of Hungarian fairy tales. In the Hungarian tales, fairies appear frequently, most often where we would expect a princess. For instance, in "The Woodland Fairy," found in Nandor Pogány's *Magyar Fairytales from Old Hungarian Legends*, a king cuts down a maple tree, which turns into a fairy (*tündér* in Hungarian) so beautiful that he immediately asks her to become his wife. He rides back to court, intending to send a carriage for her. Of course we know that, in fairy tales, it is dangerous to leave your love, once you have found her. And sure enough, along comes a gypsy who, jealous of the fairy's beauty, tricks her so that she must become a fish, and then a maple tree again, while the gypsy marries the king. Finally, the fairy becomes the gypsy's own chambermaid. The princess who disguises herself as a servant is a common theme in Western European fairy tales, but in the Hungarian tale, it is the fairy who must become a servant to regain her rightful place. When she is asked by the king to tell a fairy tale, she tells her own story, so the king finally recognizes her. The gypsy is sent away, and the fairy becomes queen.

I have summarized this story because it demonstrates how, in Hungarian fairy tales, a fairy is both like and unlike the princesses we know. Like a princess, she is beautiful and virtuous; in "The Woodland Fairy," she refuses to punish the gypsy and instead sends her away with a bag of gold. And in the end, of course, she marries the king. But a fairy, unlike a princess, is also a magical being. She is connected to the world of the forest, the wilder-



ness that is opposed to the civilized world of the court. And she can save herself by magic usually by changing into a natural form, such as a fish, a bird, or a tree

In "Prince Argyilus and the Fairy Ilona," also found in Pogany's collection, the king owns a tree on which grow golden apples. Every night those apples are stolen, and when the king's son Prince Argyilus keeps watch, he discovers that the thieves are fairies who appear in the form of ravens. Here, again, we find a magical tree at the center of the story, the king's tree is so tall that when Prince Argyilus climbs it to find Fairy Ilona, the fairy queen with whom he has fallen in love, he finds the houses of the sun, the moon, and the winds But the sun, the moon, and the winds do not know where to find her Finally he must ask the animals, and a lame wolf takes him to the castle where she is held captive by a witch The conclusion of the story is reminiscent of both "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" and "The Black Bull of Norroway"; Prince Argyilus must free Fairy Ilona by waking her with a kiss, but only at the right moment, and he must himself stay awake until that moment comes. On the third night, he manages to stay awake, kisses the fairy, and defeats the witch by putting her to sleep Of course, the story ends as fairy tales do, happily ever after

But, as Tekla Dömötör says in *Hungarian Folk Beliefs*, "[g]entle and beautiful fairy girls fit for a royal marriage exist exclusively in fairy tales " The fairies of folklore are considerably more ambiguous. They live in natural places, such as lakes and streams (often in underwater palaces) and are capable of dragging a man into the water until he drowns. Although in fairy tales fairies and witches appear in opposition to one another, in folk tales there are a number of similarities between them They both fly through the air, and both fairies and witches are known to dance in rings.

Both also resemble one of the most interesting supernatural beings of Hungarian folklore, the "fair lady" (*szépasszony*) Fair ladies are beautiful women with long hair who can appear either naked or in white dresses Like literary fairies, they can transform themselves, appearing with a horse's hoof, or in animal form, or in the form of a lover. They can also become invisible. And they are always dangerous They appear in storms and whirlwinds, and tangle horses' manes. They can make love to a man in his lover's form, or dance with him until he becomes ill or dies Like witches, they fly through the air on brooms. Like fairies, they sing as they fly, beautiful songs that men should not repeat, for fear of summoning them. And like fairies, they steal children Fair ladies, fairies, and witches are all said to reward the men they dance with, or who make music for them, with treasure, although by the next morning that treasure either disappears or turns into something worthless. In Hungary, Dömötör tells us, flirtatious young women are sometimes known as fair ladies, presumably for their fickleness However, "Fairy" is also a popular woman's name, *Tündér* or its diminutive, *Tünde*. Fairies are particularly associated with two areas: Transylvania, now part of Romania, and Csallóköz, now part of Slovakia, which were traditionally identified as the "Hungarian Fairyland." It is interesting to note that although Transylvania is associated in the Western European imagination with vampires, in Hungarian folk belief it was inhabited by fairies

Anguane, nymph-like female spirits who inhabit lakes and streams, are like freshwater mermaids In folk tales Anguane often marry mortals Natalia Pierandrei also did this illustration especially for Realms of Fantasy

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Male fairies do appear in Hungarian literature but the fairies of Hungarian folklore seem to be exclusively female Dömötör associates them, as well as the witches and fair ladies they resemble, with the female demons common to many European cultures such as the Serbo-Croatian *víla* We can also understand them as succubi, or forms of Lilith, the ancient Hebrew demon who is supposed to have stolen children. But perhaps there is another, equally interesting explanation. Fairy Ilona is not simply a character from a fairy tale Géza Róheim, in Hungarian and Vogul Mythology, identifies her as "the Hungarian version of the fairy queen of European folktale," who lived in Csallóköz. There she swam in the Danube in the shape of a swan. Róheim argues that she can also be associated with an ancient swan-goddess, the consort of the pre-Christian god of the Hungarians The word *tündér*, he tells us, is not exactly equivalent to the English "fairy"; rather, it seems to refer to a female supernatural being who is capable of appearing and disappearing, or making things appear and disappear, and is associated with fate itself. In Transylvania, Dömötör points out, the Milky Way is called the Fairy's Way. Perhaps this cosmological reference points to a greater significance for the Hungarian fairies. Remember the tree with the golden apples in "Prince Argyilus and the Fairy Ilona." Mihály Hoppál, in *Studies on Mythology and Uralic Shaman-*

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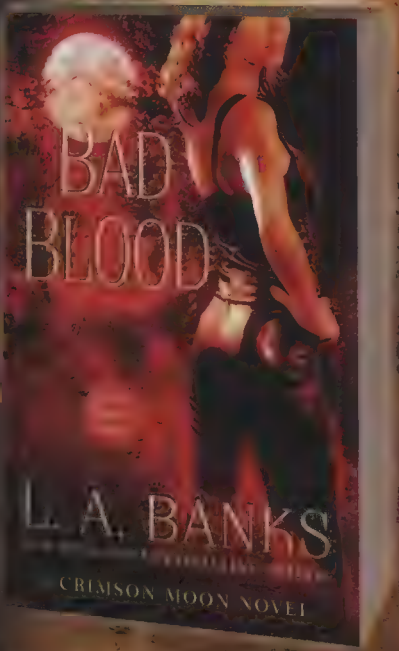

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Further Reading

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ism, writes that in Hungarian mythology the world is separated into three layers, the upper world of the gods, where we find the sun and moon, the middle world of men, and the lower world of the dead. These three worlds are connected by a tree whose branches support the sky, while its roots go down into the underworld. On its branches, according to folklore, grow golden apples that are stolen every night by fairies. Hoppál tells us that the shaman must climb this tree to gain wisdom. So, the story of Prince Argyllus may be the fairy tale version of a shamanic journey. Perhaps Róheim is correct, and Fairy Ilona is the fairy tale version of an ancient goddess whom the shaman must find and awaken. Or perhaps Fairy Ilona represents a part of the shaman himself. Hoppál tells us that birds, like the ravens in the fairy tale, were thought to represent the shaman's soul, and that his journey was often represented as flight.

Róheim links Fairy Ilona, as a swan goddess, with other European goddesses who can take the form of birds. And this brings us to a final interesting possibility. Fred Hámori, who argues that the Hunganian language is related to ancient Sumerian, believes that Fairy Ilona is the fairy tale form of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. Is there any support for this possibility in the fairy tale itself? Róheim tells us that in Finno–Ugric mythology, the Land of Birds is also the Land of the Dead. Perhaps Prince Argyllus, following Fairy Ilona in her raven form, is also following her to a symbolic land of death. Inanna, in one of her most famous myths, also visits the Land of the Dead. Like a shaman, who can travel both upward and downward on the tree with the golden apples, she descends into the underworld, which is ruled by her sister Ereshkigal. The three days and nights she spends there are reminiscent of the three days and nights it takes for Prince Argyllus to break the spell on Fairy Ilona. Perhaps the witch who holds Fairy Ilona captive is a counterpart of Ereshkigal, and the sleep that Fairy Ilona and Prince Argyllus both fall into is the fairy tale equivalent of death. Inanna's consort Dumuzi, who eventually takes her place in the underworld for half of the year is identified as a shepherd. Hoppál also refers to the shaman as a shepherd, and we have seen that Prince Argyllus's journey resembles the shaman's journey. Finally, Inanna is sometimes depicted as winged, like the fairies of European art.

This is slight evidence on which to base an identification, and Hámori's ideas on the link between Hungarian and Sumerian mythology are not accepted by serious scholars. However, it is interesting to think of the Hungarian fairies as descendants of ancient gods, like the Irish Tuatha de Danann. If we throw aside scholarly caution, we can imagine Inanna, the fickle goddess of the Sumerians, over centuries diminishing into the beautiful, virtuous literary fairies as well as the dangerous fairies, witches, and fair ladies of Hungarian folklore.

[illegible] of the Covenant Empire. But for Gwydion the Dreamer the war goes on as he schemes to continue the battle and free his own Haig[illegible] [illegible] and daring, a battle of skill and courage. [illegible] this time, the Kymri must not lose.

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The Snake
A Story of the Flat Earth

BY TANITH LEE
ILLUSTRATION BY
STEPHANIE PUI-MUN LAW

The snake lay under a low flowering tree at the side of the forest path. The snake seemed like a small spill of amber that the sun had firmed and coined with scales.

A woman passed, on broad bare feet. The snake watched from eyes like darts, but did not change its position. Later a scholar wandered by, gazing at this and that. He paused some while to inhale the perfume of the flowers, leaning into the lower branches of the tree, but his mind was so fixed on the minutiae of esoteric things, he never glimpsed the snake. The snake however saw the scholar, and watched him, yet did not stir, made no move either to strike at him or retreat. Eventually the scholar wandered off into the forest, thinking of stars and gods and other lives he had lived.

An hour later a young man came riding along the path, on the back of a jet-black horse. It was adorned with golden bells, and the rider was elegantly dressed in satin and silk, with boots of fine blond leather. He was handsome also, and seemed happy, looking up into the sky as if he saw in it all sorts of kind and generous creatures, each of which smiled lovingly back at him.

The snake suddenly flicked its amber tail.

Though small, the snake's action caused the lower and most flowery branches of the tree to begin shaking. *Swish-swish* they went—and the rider glanced down at them.

"The very flower!" he exclaimed. And dismounting gracefully at once, he reached into the tree to snap off the largest bloom. In less than a second, the snake uncoiled all its length and rose upright on its tail. Its shining head shot forward. A single hiss escaped its jaws—and its poisonous fangs stabbed deep into the young man's palm.

They say that love is blind and that love conquers death. Perhaps this is true—perhaps not.

As gleaming death spilled from his fingers he stood transfixed He stared at his hand, then upward at the sky that, moments before, had been so crowded with sweetness, yet now seemed filled with fire and doom. For him it was. He stiffened, choked. Tears poured from his eyes Rigid as a stone statue he crashed to the ground, where two or three inadvertent stony ripples ran over his body, after which he was motionless, and dead as yesterday.

The horse, frightened, galloped off along the path. The snake too had vanished

Perhaps three hundred heartbeats after, a noise of music and laughter began to be audible. and then a large company of riders, all richly clad and mounted on horses strung with bells, came dancingly into view.

Instantly an awful cry went up. The cavalcade was halted.

Living men bent over the dead man on the path

"Look, see there, the marks on his palm. Already he is turning black with venom."

"And the flower beside him," said one, "he went to the tree and plucked it for her, since this one is her favorite But he disturbed a snake—"

"The gods," said another, "can never be trusted."

Zerezel waited among her maidens, on the terrace before her father's palace, all morning, and through the flame of noon, the thick gilt of afternoon. At first they joked Had the handsome prince met another he preferred on the very road to his wedding? And they were amused, for they, and she, knew he loved only Zerezel, while even the patterns of the stars had confirmed this. Then more serious things were said—the great forest was full of tigers and lynx, robbers, ghosts—but certainly the young prince was brave and intelligent enough to defeat or elude all such dangers Besides, he had ridden that way before, and now as always traveled with a vast company of men and servants Perhaps he might have ridden a little ahead, impatient to reach his lover, but only by three hundred heartbeats, or four hundred heartbeats—no more

When the gilded afternoon turned to jasper and swung low into the western sky, the old prince, Zerezel's father, sent some of his soldiers out along the road.

Then the maidens began to weep It was Zerezel who calmed them. She moved among them gently, with her long hair that was the color of the western sky, her slender wrists ringed by pearl "All will be well " But there began to be a shadow on her beautiful face. For now it was the time for shadows. They rose up their full length and stood on their tails among the carved and painted trees of columns, they spread like poisonous stains over the patterned floors. And then the shadows burst out of the forest, shouting and calling, and making too a sound like that sound a heart makes, when it falls down through some inner chamber of the body, and into a place of blackness under the earth which men say does not exist, and which does *not*, yet which any who have ever suffered know, and have visited often.

"He is dead, Princess. He is dead."

"*Is* he dead?" she asked. "Why then, so is the world."

And so for her the world died. And she went in and lay down, and the edges of her bridal robes, and her marigold hair, poured like tears along the floor, and the darkness could come up from the hell under the earth, and veil it all in black

"She will die too."

This was what they said.

It was known by then also that her betrothed had plucked a flower for her, her favorite flower that did not anymore grow in his own land. And that was how he met the snake and death She lay in her apartment, on a floor, and drank nothing and nibbled at the air She heard no one speak to her. She said not a word. Only the medicinal spells of sages kept her in her body, and this barely.

A month passed from the calendar

Another month began to pass.

"Send," her father said, "to the four corners of the earth, send to the tops of mountains and the cellars of the seas, to deserts of sand or wind or snow. Tell any there anything I can give them I will render, to one that can save my daughter."

The messengers rode out. They scattered like thrown grains of rice along the world.

They had a great many adventures on their various journeys, each of which, probably, would crowd a whole book But there was one among them, Keshom by name, who traveled northward and then farther north, beyond the limit of any then-drawn map

Gradually, the land turned cold, and white. Keshom assumed this was from that fabled element known as "snow," which clothed the heights of the tallest mountains—apparently Yet here, the land was not so tall. It went up and down, and the *white*, which was like marble, or purified cream, was combed all over it. Here and there too Keshom seemed to see some word or other, even now and then—if only when he was very tired—whole sentences decoratively written on it . . Most strange.

After a while, however, the terrain did rise consistently. So Keshom, of course, rode upward with it.

All at once he came over a kind of ridge—and there before him stretched what he took at first to be some giant's smashed mirror of corrupt and misted glass. From its center lifted a curious tower, very black, but with veins of a glistening red.

Presently he realized, as if reason only now returned to him, that the area of broken glass ahead was a lake, seemingly frozen

Meanwhile a red light had burgeoned at the apex of the tower

Exactly then there occurred a snowfall

Keshom sat his horse, and he and it observed how this snow dropped everywhere The messenger put out his hand and caught one flake, and peered at it in dismay For there was a word on it, and so it seemed to him, written clearly, and he read it. *Thus*, it said. But then snowflake and word melted together. Keshom was glad

He did not advance until the snowfall ended But when it did, he picked toward the tower

"Does some mage live there?"

Prudently, rather than cross the ice, Keshom rode around the lake, and after perhaps three-tenths of an hour, he reached a causeway of high snowy stone, which led out to the tower. Nothing marked this but for a great skull at its beginning, which Keshom took to be that of a tiger or leopard It was black

From the vantage of the causeway he could see a single window that burned with a cool gray light, and matched the heavy sky now settling to evening

Keshom went along the causeway and arrived at the base of the tower

Above in the gray window nothing had been, or was to be seen, and there was no indication of a door whereon to knock, let alone to enter by.

But Keshom raised his well-trained voice

"My prince sends me, as one of his messengers, to all four corners of the earth, to mountaintops and sea cellars, to deserts of sand, wind, and snow I am to tell you, he will give anything he can render to one that can save his daughter."

"What is this daughter's name?" said another male voice

It seemed to speak directly in Keshom's ear, and was both quiet and overwhelming at the same time

Keshom shook his head to clear it of the sound. He thought, *This one has power.*

He answered, "Zerezel."

At this a huge panel slid back in the tower-side. Beyond, Keshom saw a dimness, lit only by the failing light of evening. Yet through the dim appeared a flight of cranky steps.

"Enter," said the other voice, more softly and even more distinctly now.

Keshom hesitated. "Great sir," said he, "may I ask *your* name?"

"*Thus*," said the voice.

And on the stair a line of gray tapers lit, to indicate, needlessly, the way.

In the far country where Zerezel lay suspended between life and death, albeit with one of her narrow feet already well across death's threshold, a full year had been sloughed from the calendar.

The old prince had aged not one but a hundred years. His complexion and his hair were white as any supernatural snow. And if a word were written on *him* it was *Despair*, plain for all to see. He paced about night and day. Only once at each dawn and once at each moonrise would he step into his daughter's chamber, where by now they had laid her on a couch. She herself was beyond all human contact. Her slenderness had grown thin, and in her bright hair too some strands of white had appeared. Her eyes were shut. She did not speak, and only a physician's glass could show she breathed. She had no awareness of the world that had died for her, nor of any person in it. She had lost everything but one thing, and that was her beauty, which still clothed her like her wedding finery, impervious. Only magic kept her alive, and this was *all* it could do. And often now, gazing at her actually lifeless deathlessness, her father would chide himself, and believe he should order the safeguards removed, that she could fully die and have peace. For perhaps in the waste of the deadlands she might find her beloved again. But the old prince had never been certain any afterlife existed, despite the teachings of the priests. For if it did, and was worth anything, why had the gods themselves preferred to be immortal?

And perhaps one can be found who will save her.

But few of the messengers had returned, and those that had brought no help. In every country they had encountered not a single man or woman of power who had reckoned themselves able to assist. "We can part oceans and topple stars," they would say, "but Lord Death we may not bargain with. And since only her lover, restored to life, would bring your princess from her deadly state, save her we cannot. Nor none can. Such a love as hers, broken, slays those who otherwise would not die. For such a love is greater than death. Go home then. We offer nothing but to pull down another star."

There was an evening when it was to be a night of no moon. On such a night the old prince spared himself a visit to Zerezel's chamber. As he sat alone, a servant came to him and told him the messenger Keshom waited nearby.

Soon Keshom knelt before the prince.

"Sir, I bring news."

The old man stared at him with a heart that quailed. Keshom looked stern and troubled. But then he spoke:

"In the farthest north, among the dry white snows, I chanced on a magician of extraordinary power. For name he takes only the word *Thus*. But he has said to me he alone can rid your daughter, exquisite Zerezel, of her killing sorrow. And I was convinced." Keshom's face, during these sentences, had altered. He seemed merely earnest now, and perhaps his former look had been due to exhaustion.

The old prince rose to his feet. He summoned his court to hear what Keshom had said, and what else he had to say. Keshom continued:

Having left his horse at the base of the tower, he climbed the stair in the half light for several minutes, until he emerged directly into a vast stone space, lit with a sort of dusk, above which, in the ceiling, burned a nonilluminating red glow like that of a setting sun.

No other was to be seen, though on all sides were cabinets stacked with scrolls of vellum, and large books bound in ebony and horn, or else in what seemed to be black or white human skin. The whole area was round and had no corners. But at the walls, equidistant from each other, were four stone beasts. One was like a griffen, and one an alligator, one a man with the head of a dog, and one a fox with the face of a child. Each of these creatures had in its forehead a jewel. The eagle brow of the griffen had a jaundiced topaz, and that of the alligator a sable pearl; the dog-headed man bore a dull purplish spinel, but the child-faced fox wore a gem Keshom had neither seen before nor heard of—it was the color of decay. From the jaws of each beast there curled out vapor. But this was odorless and faint, neither increasing nor ceasing.

Keshom had paused, rather terrified, yet in command of himself, for he had been well trained in his duties.

At length the disembodied and inimical voice he had heard outside spoke to him again from the air.

"Shall I appear?"

"That would be welcome," said Keshom.

"Do you suppose so?" the voice asked ominously.

Abruptly a cloud-like fog filled the space. It did not issue from the mouths of the four beasts, but simply straight down from the redness above.

It swirled then cleared, and when it had done so a tawny leopard crouched there, in the chamber's center. It snarled at Keshom too, showing off its fangs and blood-red mouth. But Keshom did nothing. He waited.

Then the pelt of the leopard wrinkled and poured off, and it stood upright and became a tall and slender man, whose golden hair flowed from his head over his wide shoulders. He was clothed in velvet. His face, as Keshom currently told the old prince, was of a wonderful handsomeness. Never, said Keshom, had he seen any man, nor even a woman, aside from Zerezel, whose beauty was as noble, or as instantaneously persuasive.

"Now, besides knowing the name I use, you behold my true human likeness," said the paragon to Keshom.

Keshom bowed low. "Sir," he said, "the sun has set on the world. I must ask if you are one of the Demonkind? Even if you are their lord, Azhrarn himself?"

["Indeed, murmured several of the prince's court when they heard this, "and was he as beautiful as *that*?"]

But the man, the magician, had only smiled a little at Keshom's inquiry. "Unlike that of any demon, my hair is yellow," said he, play-

Then the pelt of the leopard wrinkled and poured off, and it stood upright and became a tall and slender man, whose golden hair flowed from his head over his wide shoulders.

fully quite underestimating the glamour of his hair. "Besides, note that I wear golden rings, as no demon could, or would deign to do. No, I am not one of Azhrarn's fine troupe, though others now and then have made the same error as yourself." Keshom once more bowed low. The magician resumed. "I know of your master's daughter, Princess Zerezel. She is said to be the fairest maiden now living. What therefore ails her that she must be saved from it?"

Keshom punctually related the tragic events. He added that she lay now close to death, while her father, and all the land, mourned.

"And can none of your own scholars offer rescue?"

"None. Nor any other I have met with, despite great ability. For they say love is stronger that death. And such a love it is that slays her."

A change passed over the face of he who named himself solely *Thus*. While across the room, the stone beast that resembled a child-faced fox blinked both its eyes—even Keshom gasped—and the mortifying jewel in its forehead gleamed for an instant coldly green.

"I have heard this said before, " murmured the magician, "this of

love and death. Very well. Return to your prince. Tell him I alone can save Zerezel But my price shall be high."

"He would give you his own life, great magus, I assure you, in payment."

"And so I should, " agreed the old prince now. "Oh, can it be possible her savior is at hand? But," he added, "where is he? Surely he has traveled with you?"

"No, sir. He said he would remain in his northern tower until your answer."

"Alas! The way is so long, never now will he reach us in time—for despite any magic woven about her, I can no longer blind myself—she sinks and fades like guttering candleshine."

Outside a wind blew along the terraces of the palace, and the forest trees bowed down as it went by. A vague smoke for a moment seemed to hide the stars.

"Fear nothing," said a voice at the old prince's ear "I am already with you."

And there he was, the magician, tall and fabulous as Keshom had described him, or more so perhaps, much more

The Prince spoke to him without faltering, also well trained in his duties. "Lord Magus, you are welcome as summer But how am I to call you?"

"As your slave did. *Thus.* For that is my name.

It had not, however, always been his name.

Some twenty odd years before that moonless night, the magnificent and puissant magus, Thus, was only a spindly youth, drab of skin and shaven-headed, who drove camels for an unkind master, and went by the name of Drahn—which meant, in those regions, *Hardship.*

Drahn had been sold to camel work, at the age of six, by his mother, who demonstrably had not wanted him. If anything, she had been more unkind even than his owner, who through the ten years of their acquaintance simply half-starved him, and whipped him if he transgressed—only punching and kicking him groundlessly during bouts of drunken wrath. The camels also were harsh with Drahn, being themselves ill-treated. They too kicked him, and stinkingly spat at him. One morning, the most violent of them, a huge red animal, kicked Drahn so cruelly he lost his senses And when he woke again, the caravan had moved on, either not noticing they had mislaid Drahn, or reckoning him worth less than other rubbish shed along the route

Where Drahn had dropped was in the middle of a desert—this one not of snow but *salt*

Here for two or three blazing days, and the cold nights between, he staggered or crawled about, croaking with thirst and fear

Finally he tumbled down a slope and fetched up by a horrible little pond of black, salty liquid. Nevertheless, partially crazed, Drahn attempted to drink it. The result was ungood.

After this episode he abandoned himself to death.

He was accordingly amazed to be woken by a tall, ancient man, who held a flask of clean water to Drahn's lips, and firstly prevented him from drinking too much, which after the dearth, would have killed him more certainly than his thirst.

One salt-preserved tree grew by the pond. It had a whitish trunk and even leaves, these like strips of fossilized gum.

Here then the ancient man sat sheltering, and Drahn beside him, while the blade of the sun sliced its slow agony from east to west

Drahn had little social chat

Neither had the ancient one. *He* spoke only facts

"I am glad to have met with you, Drahn," he said, "since Lord Fate decrees I must perish here of old age, and all my mighty magecraft cannot prevent it."

"Pah! What magecraft, you old goat?" politely inquired Drahn, who of course had learnt his manners from sadists and camels

"Why, lad. Such as this—"

At which the filthy pond puddle changed to a pool of crystal water, and the salted down tree to a towering palm, pineapple-trunked with fronds like malachite

"Ahhh!" screamed Drahn

"Yes, yes. But to continue. I have been caught unawares by my own demise—which I confess I had not bothered to predict, which prediction is in any case an inexact science, just as King Death himself does not always know when he must rise up and strike us down. Unawares. I *say*, I despaired of finding any to whom I might pass on such quantities of power as I contain. (For you must understand, I possess also the knack of gifting my brilliance to anyone, at my death.) However, despair begone! Here *you* are! And yes, poor boy, you are such a ghastly specimen, ugly, brainless, and vile, that I shall be able to fill you to the brim with greatness, glory, strength, and genius, not to mention vast physical beauty, and magery beyond all dreams *You* will far excel even myself For I was cultured, a clever and educated man at the hour these attributes came to me, and handsome too. Which left less room for improvement. With *you*, the tide of power will work in unimpeded transfer The dreary vacant vessel which is yourself will be flooded, and so enlarge After all, it is always better to gather water in an empty jar. Or write on a blank page." (Drahn snorted and gobbled in confusion.) Taking no notice, the sage finalized· "Now brace yourself for the torrent of benefits. Also for extreme amounts of time in which to exercise and enjoy them. For though this cannot make you either invulnerable or immortal, and one day you, as I, must die (and should be careful meanwhile of accidents), with reasonable care longevity is yours. I myself have lived hundreds of years But death encroaches. I feel his hand upon me—therefore, receive all—*Thus!*"

Then the sage stretched out his own hand, and as one finger of it touched Drahn, a blow far more conclusive than that of a camel's hoof threw him into oblivion

Waking the gods knew how much later, he found himself in a luxurious oasis of palms, dates, and orange trees, where wholesome fountains sparkled, and deer and hyenas drank together in harmony at the lustrous pool The sage had vanished Only some bones, picked pristine, lay along the pool's rim

And Drahn? Drahn was gone

The *he* that had woken was not the *he* that he had been.

In the water, he saw the new *he* that he now was.

And presently, without effort translocating himself from the oasis to some other spot miles off, he laughed aloud and renamed himself for the last word he had heard when in mundane human form

The old prince and his court conducted the Magician Thus solemnly up the winding ways of the palace, to the life-death chamber of Princess Zerezel

All were afraid—but the magician

They flung open the doors—an *act* of fear

Beyond the extended teardrops of windows, the moonless night hung black as a curtain, torn and fanged with stars.

In the glimmer of a solitary lamp, a single couch And on the couch lay Zerezel Hair of sunset and winter frost Skin of silk and silence Beauty of the world, *despising* the world. Alive Dead In her wedding garments of baffled, thwarted love

Not a word, let alone a phrase, was spoken by any of them

Not even Thus spoke in his mage's voice

Keshom though, who had come up to the chamber with the rest, glanced at the magician warily. And saw that in the magus's face the skull stood out like a knife

Then he alone moved forward, the magician Thus, and standing by her bed, he looked directly down at her If never before had he seen her, surely even like this, he must love her now. If ever before he *had* seen Zerezel, he must have loved her then.

He was, it was a fact, much handsomer than the man she had adored and meant to wed Thus truly did possess the perfect gorgeousness credited to demons

And when he bent toward her, and his mane of hair, in the lamp's low gleam like a rush of volcanic rain, furled round her, who could not believe that these moments had been preordained. As, in a way, they had.

The sage's tower, when Drahn-now-Thus had first came to it, rose from a lake of glassy water, amid a plain of blowing grass. It was, the tower, of marble, and veined with luminous rainbow colors. Imbued with the learning, wisdom, sorcerous genius, and memory of the sage, Drahn-Thus recognized the tower instantly, and entered it.

A white stair went up to the sage's library, which was sunny both day and night. The walls were lined with scrolls and books, cased or bound in covers of precious materials, none of which seemed earthly in origin. Above in the ceiling beamed a constant sunlight. Equidistant from each other, four marble beasts guarded the chamber. They were a feathered lion, a graceful lizard, a smooth-coated dog, and a little child with butterfly wings. On the forehead of each shone a gem. The lion had a sky blue topaz, the lizard a silvery pearl, the dog a crimson spinel. But the child's jewel was clear and flashing as water. It was a diamond.

Knowing how, Thus made his home in the tower.

From the tower, also knowing how, he came to rule all the land about.

In his brain was the memory of the mage-sage. The sage had been benign, gentle, and trusted. Wherever therefore that Thus took himself, he was greeted with gladness, and at once recognized as the sage's heir.

For one bred to abject slavery and misuse, lessoned only in cruelty, to one unattractive, mindless, and foul, such happenings were a tonic.

Years passed, on bare broad feet. Decades wandered by, scholastically gazing at this and that.

From the mouths of the four beings in the tower faint smokes began to issue. They could tell Thus of so many matters, and he questioned them very often, determined to learn, to understand and grasp. He had indeed been empty, was greedy now.

The sage had known, seeing Drahn in the desert of salt, that to give him too much water too swiftly in his great thirst would physically ruin and destroy him. Yet this careful sage had also deluged Drahn with psychic power, not even thinking twice.

He did not set a hand on her, the woman who lay before him.

All saw this, the throng in the lamplit chamber.

Yet, despite the brazen rainfall of his hair, it was obvious to them that he bent toward Zerezel like a stooping hawk. Most realized next, with a sudden start, he had placed his lips upon hers.

He kissed her.

He kissed her, and from the night all about a composite sigh, a breeze, a breath, winged up.

For *kindness* kisses. Honor kisses. *Love* kisses.

He did not linger then, but raised his head, and stood above the lovely spill of her body.

Soundlessness followed the sigh, and stasis, and in the solitary lamp the flame faltered as if it must go out—before leaping high, filling the whole chamber with light.

Where had she been to, Zerezel? Oh, she did not think or know or care. Somewhere, nowhere. Where the beaten soul will drag itself, wishing too it should die.

Yet there, after millenia, something brushed against her, as a leaf may glance across a sleeping hand.

It was more than that. Weightless, formless, yet it had to it a peerless bitter-sweetness, and an edge like honed steel. It had the sort of voice which called more loudly than any trumpet note, more subtly than any murmur uttered either side of life.

In the glimmer of a solitary lamp, a single couch. And on the couch lay Zerezel. Hair of sunset and winter frost. Skin of silk and silence. Beauty of the world, *despising* the world. Alive. Dead. In her wedding garments of baffled, thwarted love.

She lifted her face from the ashes of nothingness. Sightless and deaf, she waited to see and hear again this *thing*. At a loss. And when the summons did not come again, still she turned and broke the surface of the ash entire, and she flew out like a bird toward the sun—outward, upward, into the living world.

In the chamber with the lamp it was as if a glass screen shattered.

She had seemed dead, the prince's daughter. Now in one movement she rose straight up from the couch, kneeled there on it, and death fell from her like a veil.

Her eyes were wide and full of a vital searching.

She spoke hoarsely, for her voice had been dumb some while.

She spoke only to one.

"How?" she asked. "How? How have *you* done this?"

Then the magician flaunted himself before her. It was his vanity, and few could miss it. (Did she?) But after all why should he not be vain, when he had worked such a miracle?

How *had* he done it? Through his great power, evidently, his force of charisma.

But "I have done it," he told Zerezel, "through love."

"Then," she whispered, "*I love you.*"

After which she fell back on the couch, too weak to offer anything other. Which hardly mattered, she had offered all. And her eyes anyway stayed open, and burned on the magician. It was noted, by some regretfully and by others in approval, that never had she gazed with such hypnotized fascination at her former bridegroom, even though his death had nearly slain her.

The palace rang with celebration. Flags of scarlet and saffron dripped from ledges. Firecrackers were being made ready to fill the sky with arcs and orbs and showers of rose-red stars.

Keshom entered the princess's apartment.

How changed everything was. The floors and walls dazzled with polishing and sunshine. Most burnished of all, the young woman who stood before him. She had given orders and the couch was taken away on which she had lain so long. It was an emblem of sadness and ill-omen, and had been burned.

Now Zerezel's eyes burned. The fire in them was very bright, all her sorrow seemingly consumed there.

She spoke at once. "Tell me of him."

Of course, Keshom had no doubt of whom she wished to hear. Yet it was quite curious, for in another day and evening, that same man and she were to be married. This was the price Thus had demanded of her father. Zerezel herself. The old prince had been glad to pay it. As for the girl, she had already consented, for had she not whispered before them all *I love you*.

"Lady," said Keshom, "what would you know? I was with him only that one hour inside his room of magic."

"Tell me of that, then," said Zerezel.

So Keshom described again what he had seen, and what had

been said and done

She listened attentively, occasionally nodding. And as he spoke, Keshom saw how she was strong and well, a bloom of health on her from the magician's healing kiss, even the white that had come in her hair disguised and colored over. One would not know, to look at her now, she had suffered any loss

When Keshom concluded his account, she said, "And after? What did you learn *then*, when you had left him?"

Keshom frowned

"That is," she said, "when you traveled back from the tower. You will have passed through the lands best known to the Lord Thus. Surely they talked of him there?"

Keshom frowned worse. It was true enough, the magician *was* talked of, if one should ask about him, as Keshom had during his return journey.

"They praised his erudition, lady, and his looks. They told of wonders he had performed, incredible feats of marvel. Although ..."

"Although?"

"They were afraid of him too." Keshom lowered his eyes, for now *her* eyes blazed only with great anger. Certainly she must think he slighted her second suitor. Quickly Keshom added, "Such power as his may terrify. As I have said, even to me he showed himself as a leopard. He is able to assume such forms, and it would be impossible not to be afraid of it. Besides, I have heard the stone creatures in his tower tell and show him everything he desires. He is like a god on earth. One may adore and admire and *also* fear such prowess."

"Yet, though long-lived, he is not an immortal, nor invulnerable," said Zerezel, rather doubtfully. "So I have heard. Can this be so?"

> From his curses the jewels of all four creatures were muddied. But the child's turned a dreaful shade. Yet as the child was also robbed of its form, becoming a fox with only a child's face left to it, it *laughed*, though this seemed just the barking of the fox.

She dreads she will lose him like her last lover, thought Keshom. And he said, "So too I heard—that he is vulnerable and mortal both. Yet, we concede, so mighty in power, he is well equipped to defend himself." After which Keshom bit his tongue, for he wished the magician might not be so armed in his own defense, that he *might* be lost to Zerezel, and to the palace, and to the whole earth

For Keshom *had* asked for stones in those lands of the Magus Thus, and first he was given only the most fulsome praise of him. Royal messenger as he was, Keshom had known this at once for the subterfuge of pure terror. And gradually he weaned some of them to mutter the truth, or scraps of it. And these tiny scraps were like huge blots of filth soon smeared all over the image of the magician. Thus was to the people round about his tower a beast, not only in his shape-shifting, but in his inhuman cruelties and viciousness, his greed and evil-doing. They had another name for him, too. Here and there Keshom had seen, or been shown it, scratched into some wall or fence as a warning, and the magician had not, lion as he was there, bothered to smite the scratches away. *Drahk*, that was the harsh name the people of those regions gave him. *Drahk*.

Keshom himself had known but too well he could not cross such a mortal demon. (Demonkind might have been nicer to deal with. They had their own oblique codes, and would sometimes make bargains.)

The monster however would merely kill him, and worse, vent his displeasure on those who spoke ill of him. And therefore Keshom had come home and delivered the magician's message, and all the rest followed.

Much alarmed, only one item *perplexed* Keshom at this point. That a being of such enormous and unfastidious power should trouble to save Zerezel, let alone require to wed her.

The princess meanwhile nodded. Her eyes were dark. Was she then content with what he had said? Approaching Keshom, she gave him a silver ring with a white gem in it. "You are a good man, Keshom."

He thanked her and went away, and raged at himself that he had not confessed the horror to her. But it would have been no use. Thus—or *Drahk*—had each of them in this thrall. And she, poor maiden—*loved* him.

The wedding day arrived.
Dawn tull sunfall they rejoced
Birds were loosed in multicolored drifts; incenses spiraled upward; night closed and was undone with fireworks.

After the banquet, with garlands and singing, Zerezel went up to her bridal bower. Never had any woman looked so lovely, or so glad. Presently her husband, the magician, followed her. Never had any man looked so god-like. Or so sure.

Priests blessed the bed, the rafters, the doorway, and all nine windows of the room. Wine and perfume were spilled. A guard of attendance waited in the antechamber as custom decreed. Three maidens chosen for their virtues, and three gentlemen chosen likewise for theirs. It seemed Zerezel had asked that Keshom be one of these. It was a bestowal of much favor, for which he was envied. He would, needless to say, rather have been placed in a dungeon for the night.

Outside, beyond the festive gardens, the forest hushed and rustled, asking itself perhaps what went on now in that huge lighted house, where, for a year, only lament and silence had visited. And perhaps too certain trees asked each other, or the sky above to which they prayed with the upraised wooden fingers of their branches, *Has she forgotten him so soon? Has she forgotten her beloved one? He that died against our feet from the bite of a little golden snake?* But to that, neither the trees nor the sky gave answer.

Drahk who was Thus. Thus who was Drahk. Years he ruled that land the kind, pompous sage had governed, and that had expected something similar from Drahk. But Drahk had been Drahn and Drahn had been scum. And for every particle of mystic brilliance that entered his brain, still Drahn too lurked in there, skulking like a venomous insect in the corner of a golden palace filled by lights. Or, as a poisonous snake might do, of course.

People and lands were soiled and spoiled. The landscape was altered to a desert, and then came the scourges of winds, and then the snow dropped dry and adamant, white, like salt. The lake too froze and broke and froze. The ethereal rainbow marble of the tower went black and seemed to run with blood, the blood of those savaged by Drahk who was still Drahn, and taught by camel-kicks and the fists of dead souled human *things*.

The sage, dying, for all his genius forgot his common sense. He knew not to give a man perishing of thirst too much water. He did not consider that this might apply also to the giving of flawless knowledge and magecraft to one dehydrated of all goodness, thought, and heart. Oh, that power—

In it had gushed.

Another receiving it would have died. Alas, Drahn-Drahk lived on. And on and on, for though not invulnerable, as Keshom remarked, Drakh's cunning and defenses, once marshaled, were never overcome.

So he ruled his ruined lands. And when he grew bored with his

sin, he asked questions of the wise stone beasts, the feathered lion and giant lizard, the dog, the child with butterfly wings. And the topics he asked to hear of and see converted those arcane creatures to a predatory griffen, an alligator, a man with a dog's head—and the child lost its beautiful wings.

But then there came a night when Drahk considered he had seen and learned and done all that could interest him. And boredom gnawed. So then he said to all four beasts. "I am the best of men. I am master of the earth. I therefore disdain to conquer and rule more of it than these few miles, for it is all the same. Instead I will have something else. For any woman I have seen that I have wanted—I took. They were all dross. Yet maybe there is one who is not dross. A virgin, and the most glorious. Find and show me that one. The fairest woman on earth, as I am easily the most handsome among men."

Vanity, always that, with him. He had had nothing, now had, could have, it all. Boasted and wanted to partner his grandeur. A moon to his sun, a satellite to his world.

The beasts obliged. That was their fate.

The griffen revealed a wondrous woman in the east, but she was too old for Drahk. The alligator revealed a more wondrous and younger woman in the west, but she was a harlot. The dog-man revealed one younger and more wondrous still, but she was newly deceased, and had lain three days in her tomb. Drahk cursed his servants. Then he said to the wingless child, "Now, you. And be sure *you* do not fail me."

And the child revealed Zerezel, in the far south, and she was young and virgin and the most beautiful woman living on earth. But she loved another man and was due to wed him.

Drahk said, "If *I* go to her, she will instantly forget the fool. She will want only me."

But the child answered softly, "No, lord magician. For true love is blind. True love can only love. Such love is a sword, stronger even than death—therefore beware of it!"

At these words Drahk, entirely at last frustrated, felt the sword of true love pierce *him*, through the heart he had never properly had, either as Drahn or Drahk. And so he cursed the stone child too, whose wings had already been ripped away.

From his curses the jewels of all four creatures were muddied. But the child's turned a dreadful shade. Yet as the child was also robbed of its form, becoming a fox with only a child's face left to it, it *laughed*, though this seemed just the barking of the fox.

And here now is the puzzle of the magician.

Evil and ignorant he was. Fantastically enlightened and made a genius as well. And in that way his spirit was at war with nature within him. Though *he* wished only to exercise his vileness, the power that had become his mind yearned for sanity and goodness, and pulled and struggled and rent at him. Because of this he had hoped to find some way to outwit his better side, to blind it in one eye—which was that of the intellect and soul.

And unfortunately the manner was to hand. Arch-mage that he had become, could he not shape-shift?

Like one donning another coat, Drahk had put on him the form of a leopard, and went out to kill and rape and raven. Or he wore another mantle for it, that of the bear, or of the unicorn, or the shape of a tiger or the wolverine. So he indulged his pleasures, so he outwitted himself.

And this method did not, even in his new ecstasy of love, desert him.

The clean power always refused to allow him the act of murder, but once no longer human he was without conscience. And he was used, by then, to splitting himself in twain. It was surprisingly very easy.

He had obsessively studied Zerezel some while. He knew, amongst other things, her favorite flowers.

Drahk blighted all of them in her lover's country, and instead grew a tree of them beside a forest path, along which her betrothed would travel, a little ahead of his retinue, as Drahk had seen he always did.

Drahk then contemplated, and selected the most fitting alternate form to put on. He assumed it. And lay under the tree of flowers, and waited patiently.

When the bridegroom entered the bed-chamber, his bride stood before him. She was clothed as if in silken mist and her hair was like a waterfall.

Her eyes rested on him with the most profound hunger.

How could she help but love him? And he loved her.

He knew this.

Love stronger than death.

He had used up so much carnal passion in unspeakable scenarios, that now he paused a minute, gazing at her, wanting to delve in himself for some wholesome dream of lust, of longing, and certain he did so.

Zerezel seemed faultlessly to suit herself to his mood. Only after some time did she address him.

"My beloved lord," she said, "you brought me from the outskirts of death's kingdom. And you are the mightiest mage known upon earth. How can it be you—*you*—a god among mankind, have chosen *me*?"

"Ah," he said. A fakery of dismissal.

"Beloved," she said, "I do not deserve you."

Something struck a spark then in his vain, divided mind.

With a hint of—was it *petulance*?—he said, "Nor I you, it seems. Since you loved and would have wed another."

"He is *nothing*," said the woman immediately. And her eyes revealed without doubt that only Drahk (Thus) filled her thoughts.

"You did not reckon him nothing once," said Drahk. "Nor myself anything at all."

"How might I? I had never looked on you. Nor had you beheld me either."

"Suppose," said Drahk quietly, "I were to tell you that, even before that man's untimely end, I *had* seen, and *had* desired you?"

Was she stunned by this? It seemed so. "My lord—I must ask you why then you hesitated? For if you had come to me then, and I had seen *you*, could I have wanted any other?" (And beyond the windows the forest rustled and hushed, lifting its praying wooden arms to the sky.)

Drahk mused. "Could you not? But if you had loved me better, what then of your betrothed? The contract was too firm to break."

She grew deadly pale and answered, "I should have despised him, having looked on you. I would have begged that someone kill him and rid me of him instantly."

"One did kill him, and rid you of him."

"A snake, they say. How I wish I might see that snake! I would have them make a temple to its glory."

Drahk preened himself. "Oh, I could show it to you."

"What, can you summon it?"

"In a way. I could take on its form."

She laughed then. It was a melody, her laughter, played only for one man. "I know, lord, you are a shape-changer. But, beloved love, lord of earth and forever, a leopard is your form, or a lion—some kingly beast—or an eagle, a dragon—never a snake. How could you become such?"

Drahk smiled. Was his smile playful too, or very dangerous? "Do you doubt it?" he inquired. "Are you unable to picture it?"

She lowered her beautiful and fiery eyes.

It was midnight.

A moon had risen late.

The amber debris of the firecrackers still clouded the forest, and the moon itself smoldered like a ruby, even when it reached the apex of the sky.

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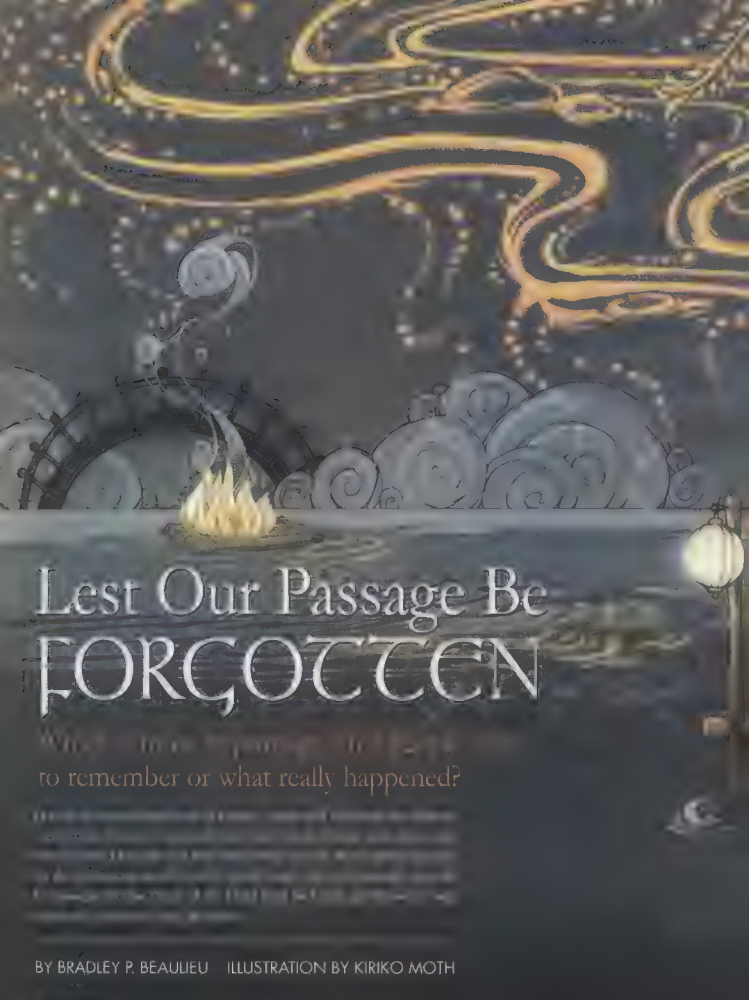

Lest Our Passage Be FORGOTTEN

to remember or what really happened?

BY BRADLEY P. BEAULIEU ILLUSTRATION BY KIRIKO MOTH

Over two hundred came to pay their respects. The men put on fine woolen suits and chose their best top hats, the women their prettiest crinoline dresses and frilly bonnets, and they gathered on the parade grounds by the rocky shore of Kaidon's largest lake. They talked pleasantly of their favorite memories as the warm night wind toyed with the rice paper lanterns that were spread throughout the grounds and along the pier.

The crowd parted for the surviving family as they paced down the pier toward Shikujo's plain casket, which rested on a pyre raft. His wife bore a lit torch, and her four sons stepped in unison behind her, each of them carrying a black lacquered pole tipped with a silver cap. When they reached the casket, the wife kneeled and lit the pyre in three different places: birth, life, and death.

Yasuo, the architect of the forthcoming fireworks display, stood nearby in case the family had any questions whatsoever. There were typically none, but he always made himself available in case there were. He also liked gauging the crowd's reactions, no matter how uncomfortable he became with so many people so close. And, he admitted, there was one person he would like to talk to if the opportunity arose. He had been scanning the crowd since the service had begun, but so far he hadn't seen her.

As the flames built beneath Shikujo's casket, the crowd along the pier pressed forward, leaving the barest of spaces out of respect to the grieving family and a not-inconsiderable fear of the dead and those who dealt with it directly. Still, though Yasuo could see space between himself and the crowd, it felt like they were breathing down his neck and in short order he found himself shuffling backward until one more step would mean an ignominious drop into the frigid water of the lake. He steeled himself and took measured breaths, knowing this was the best thing he could do until the display had concluded.

Shikujo's sons used the poles in unison to push the raft toward the center of the lake. Yasuo watched carefully as the flame built. Few would have an eye trained as his was, and so they would miss the telltale signs as the dead were attracted to the flames. The first showed itself near the marshes, another nearby—both of them little more than wisps of fog on a moonlit night. Three more appeared beneath the arched bridge in the distance. Another, bolder spirit materialized directly over the lake, only yards away from the pyre, a sign that the spirits were ready to receive Shikujo.

The crowd's attention followed the first firework as it snaked upward and splashed against the darkened sky. Castle Taishiyoko with its seven tiers was lit in ghostly relief as sparkling tendrils stretched their way closer to the bridges connecting the lake's islands. A moment later, the thunder of the firework fell upon the crowd.

As did the first memory.

The scene of the lake, the pyre, the castle all melted away, replaced by a view of one of the lake's many islands. The water lapped at the rocky shoreline nearby, and the air smelled of cherry blossoms, for this had happened to him in spring. It showed Shikujo as a boy, wearing blue knickers and his only cotton shirt. He sat cross-legged on the grass, a wriggling crab pinched between two of his fingers. His older sister sat next to him in a white frilly dress, cringing as she defended herself against the crab. Shikujo's almond-shaped eyes crinkled with glee as he continued to shake the crab at her. Then he flung it, laughing hysterically. The crab stuck. His sister screamed and shot up, acting as if her clothes and hair had suddenly burst into flames.

As she sprinted across the red bridge, Shikujo stared at her, his face going from smiling to confusion to worry in the span of seconds. He got up and stared down at the crab, which had fallen into the grass as soon as she'd stood. He looked like he would stomp it as it tried to regain the water, but instead he cradled it with both hands and set it gently in the water. Then he ran across the bridge, shouting his sister's name.

As the image dimmed, a low susurrus of pleased conversation spread through the crowd. Yasuo turned, feeling their collective weight in the pit of his stomach, and studied them. It was difficult to discern their mood, for there were only a few swaying lanterns along the dock, but when the second firework burst, he could see that their faces were lit by melancholy smiles.

Another memory played itself out as if the entire crowd shared a single mind. Shikujo was meeting his wife for the first time. How nervous he was; how giddy. Another firework flashed, and the memory of his first-born child came. Again and again the fireworks sparked memories of a man who was certainly walking with his head held high into the Lands of the Dead.

By the time the show ended, Yasuo had to hide his smile. He was more than pleased, but it wouldn't do to show himself as overly proud of his accomplishment. The show, after all, had been authored by the vivid and touching memories of Shikujo, not him. But there was a strong sense of accomplishment in what Yasuo had done. He had coaxed the memories from Shikujo—the proper sorts of memories—to share with loved ones and those beyond who stood ready to welcome him to the spirit life.

The crowd parted for Shikujo's wife and sons as they walked up the pier. The mother gave Yasuo no more than you than a short nod of her head before leaving. The sons acknowledged him not at all.

Then, in pairs and in groups, the crowd began to disperse, and slowly the pressure in Yasuo's chest eased. He looked one last time over the crowd, and thought he saw her near the shoreline. It looked like Harune, but the crowd was still so tight that he couldn't bring himself to brave the parade grounds to find out. When she left, herding her daughter in front of her, Yasuo breathed a sigh of relief. He probably couldn't have made it to her in time anyway, not without making himself look like a fool.

> Her face was painted in white makeup, save for her eyes, which were shaded in the deepest of reds, but unlike the stage actors, who appeared so meticulous, she seemed haggard and worn around the edges.

He turned and walked toward his boat, ready to row out to his island and end the night with a nice glass of rice wine, when someone called to him.

"Osokura-san!"

Yasuo turned to find an older gentleman waving, his leather boots clomping loudly on the pier as he strode forward. He wore a black coat with tails and a white shirt with a high, stiff collar. His gray hair was cut tight, his mustache thin as a line of ink. It was more the fashion in the Emperor's city than here in the outlands.

When the man neared, Yasuo stiffened, for he wore an emerald green cravat. Yasuo quickly squared his shoulders and bowed his head, for this man had clearly been sent by the Daimyo.

After a respectful moment the man said, "Please, Osokura-san, you may look upon me."

"Thank you, O-sama."

He stood by a pier pylon with its rice paper lantern, which lit his face with a golden glow. He seemed in such good health that Yasuo hadn't realized how old he was. He must have seen sixty winters at the very least.

"If it please you, what service can I perform?"

"Please, call me Asuhiko-sama. I've come to discuss the fireworks. They were superb. Shikuyo could not have expected such a display even in his most fervent dreams."

"My thanks," Yasuo replied.

"Truly, it was spectacular, better than the ones in the capital."

"I am most sure Asuhiko-sama is only being kind."

"I am not. It is pure fact." He looked back along the pier, and apparently found the last few stragglers far enough away to speak confidentially. "There is something the Daimyo would like you to do for him."

Yasuo quickly bowed his head to hide his look of surprise. "Of course, O-sama. What service might I perform?"

"I must begin by confessing that this is most sensitive, and so must remain between us, no matter what your answer."

"Yes, of course. Anything."

"Yoshida-dono's mother is sick."

Yasuo's throat tightened.

"She needs help, Osokura-san. She needs to be prepared for the walk to Shuri-kin, and the Daimyo would be pleased if you would do it."

"But, O-sama, the Daimyo's own mother ... is she gravely ill? Because it takes some time—"

"She is not so ill that you won't have time to prepare her."

"Then, forgive my boldness, but my skills are surely not up to the task. Someone from the capital would be better suited, I am sure."

"Rise, Osokura-san."

Yasuo complied. This gentleman from the castle stared at him with something close to amusement, and Yasuo hoped his embarrassment was hidden by the relative darkness.

"The Daimyo wants someone who has been here, in the place his mother was born, where she lived and where she'll die." He waited for some time, perhaps trying to read Yasuo's face. "May we expect you at the castle tomorrow morning?"

Yasuo dearly wished he could say no, but there was no getting out of such a direct request. "I am humbled by the Daimyo's kindness."

Yasuo rowed in from his small island home early the next morning and arrived at the castle with his black leather bag, the one in which he kept all of his implements. The guards at the entrance, wearing traditional bamboo armor, announced his presence, and he was met shortly by Asuhiko.

He led Yasuo along hallways with lacquered floorboards and ornate paper walls and glazed urns on tall rosewood pedestals. They took the stairs to the seventh story and reached a black-stained door with three carved dragons writhing on its surface. Asuhiko rapped on the bronze knocker three times.

A servant woman dressed in a silk, cream-colored kimono opened the door. Her hair, bound into an impeccably tight bun, was held in place with a pair of tortoise shell pins. She bowed her head upon seeing Asuhiko and stepped aside.

"I will leave you here," Asuhiko said. "She is expecting you."

"Wait, is there a bed where I can—"

"Everything has been prepared," he said, and with that he left, his footsteps creaking loudly as he walked away.

Yasuo took a deep breath and entered the room, at which point the handmaid closed the door and retreated to an embroidered silk pillow in one corner. She kneeled, laid her hands in her lap, and bowed her head—for all purposes a fixture until she was called upon by the Daimyo's mother. A padded couch occupied the center of the room. Two sliding doors along one wall were open, allowing a cool but humid breeze into the room. It had rained that morning, and Yasuo could smell the loamy scent of the nearby forest. It was eerily quiet, which made Yasuo nervous to make any noise whatsoever.

Several poems were mounted on the wall, each of them set against red silk backing. The corners of the paper were curled and yellowed with age. He stopped and admired one.

The willow
Lying on the bank
Its vines swaying in the breeze
Who would have thought to find such beauty?

He set his bag down carefully near the couch, wondering when the Daimyo's mother would be brought to him, but then he heard shuffling footsteps and the jingle of tiny bells from the balcony outside.

A moment later, a crooked woman hobbled into the doorway and stood there, staring at him. She wore the ornate robes of the nobility, and a formal, tasseled headdress as well. Her face was painted in white makeup, save for her eyes and lips, which were shaded in the deepest of reds, but unlike the stage actors, who appeared so meticulous, she seemed haggard and worn around the edges. Her bloodshot eyes squinted at him as she shuffled closer.

Then she shot forward, bells jingling, arms flinging wide, mouth prying open to release a red, waggling piece of flesh that looked more akin to uncooked beef than it did a tongue.

Yasuo staggered backward, tripped over the couch, landing hard on his hip. He jerked back to find her rounding the couch, her claw-like hands raised high like the dragons on the door. He scrabbled backward, slipping on the floorboards, as a cackle escaped the ancient woman. She slowed and her hands dropped to her knees as she bent over, her cackle turning into a full-fledged, body-shaking laugh.

Yasuo sat there, watching, confused. But when he realized the servant had stayed in the exact same position, not even bothering to raise her head, he knew this was some sort of prank.

The Daimyo's mother reared back and pointed at him. "Do you know how scared you looked? I might help you reach the spirit lands if you're not careful, smokeman!" She was about to say more, but a fresh laughing fit overtook her.

Yasuo made it to his feet, wiping his woolen pants and suit coat though the floors of the palace were impeccably clean. He stared at her, trying to summon his dignity as her chuckles ebbed, slow as the tide.

"Oh, come now, don't you ever scare children?" She turned and walked back to the doorway, leaving the sour scent of wine in her wake.

"I am not a child," he said, suddenly embarrassed he had no children of his own to scare.

"So you aren't," she replied stiffly. "I have only one, and he doesn't allow me to play tricks on him anymore. So you will have to do in his place."

"Begging your pardon, but I hardly think that is my place."

She turned back to Yasuo, nearly tipping herself over. She eyed Yasuo severely before saying, "My, but you are a prickly one, aren't you? Asuhiko didn't tell me that."

He also hadn't told Yasuo how cantankerous the Daimyo's mother was.

Yasuo, finally remembering his manners, bowed his head. "I assume he did tell you why I've come."

"Get your head up, you lout! Don't ever do that in my presence again."

"O-dono. I--"

"My name is not O-dono," she shouted, "nor is it Yoshida-dono! It is Fuyoko! Now, head up, smokeman, or I'll have your tongue out."

He looked up, his heart racing, but when he saw her smiling again, those old wrinkled eyes crinkled into tight slits, he realized she was trying to goad him again.

"Or maybe I'll play more jokes." She winked. "One of the two."

Yasuo took a deep breath and motioned to the couch. "This does take some time, O-dono."

Fuyoko rolled her eyes. "You're dry as a bone, you are."

"It tends to follow when one deals with death every day of his life."

She had begun pulling at the intricate ties of her robe, but she stopped when he said that, and nodded. "It might," she said while undoing the last of the ties. "That's true."

"Please, O-dono, I would interview you first."

She shook her head while removing the headdress. The simultaneous actions seemed too much for her, for she tipped sideways and

had to catch herself clumsily against the couch. She smiled as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "I already have a memory for you. Specially chosen."

"It is important that we talk—"

"I told you I already have one." And with that she pulled her robe free and allowed it to pool about her feet.

Yasuo hid a sigh while opening his leather case. He removed twelve clear glass cups and set them on the floor in two ordered rows. Fuyoko lay on the couch, her feet pointing at Yasuo, her wrinkled backside glaring at him like an angry old toad. The first moments of nakedness, even after all the years in his profession, were still uncomfortable for Yasuo. He still felt out of place, mostly because he was at a stage where he knew so little about his subject.

Plus there was the simple fact of Fuyoko's elevated status. Yasuo thought as he glanced at the handmaid.

She hadn't moved an inch.

It would typically mean death for a common man to witness the Daimyo's mother in such a manner, but the courtesies given to the practitioners of birth and death were essentially the same.

The Daimyo's mother looked back at him and pursed her red lips as if she were his lover. "Will it hurt?" she asked.

It was such an absurd comment and his nerves were so tight that a laugh burst from Yasuo before he could prevent it.

Fuyoko smiled. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Yasuo covered her up with a white cloth until only her back was exposed. "This is serious work, O dono."

"Then why are you still laughing?"

A few more chuckles escaped as he took the procedure's most expensive component, a small bottle of dragon oil, and carefully traced a line of it along her spine.

"That's cold!" she shouted, swatting at him with her hand.

He composed himself and began massaging her back. "The key," he said, calming his voice to a more soothing tone, "is to get to the muscles, to loosen them. Once that's done, the memories will follow. Focus on the memory you have in mind. Replay it over and over, focusing on any detail you can, no matter how small it may seem."

He continued to stroke the long muscles that bracketed the spine, by far the most important. He heard light snores coming from the head of the table. He leaned over and looked at her. Her rouged eyes were shut, but then she opened one of them and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did I fall asleep? Your story so intrigued me, I can't imagine how that could have happened."

He ignored the gibe, willing to take some abuse as long as the memory proved useful.

Fuyoko seemed relaxed enough, so he retrieved one of the glasses and lit a thick stick of mountain sage incense. He ran the quickly burning incense over her back, trailing smoke like the burning paper serpents of the New Year. Then he tipped the first glass upside down over the glowering tip, capturing the heat and the smoke. When he'd had enough—it didn't take long—he pulled the incense away and lowered the glass onto her back just next to the spine.

"Ow!" Fuyuko squirmed, but he kept the glass firmly in place.

"Please," he said as her skin was pulled upward inside the glass from the cooling air within, "keep the memory firmly in your mind until I tell you to stop. The oil and the incense will do the rest."

Then he hummed—a low, droning sound—while continuing to heat glasses and position them along her spine. He stopped when there were a dozen, six on each side. She looked like a pale, wrinkled dragon with a dozen glass eyes upon its back.

The smoke eventually cooled and collected on the oil coating her skin. It would have already absorbed most of the memory from her, but he allowed it to stay while he hummed, keeping her as relaxed as possible.

When he felt it was time, he placed the palms of his hands on the two highest glasses. The memory tugged at his mind.

It showed a much younger version of Fuyoko. He might even say she was pretty. She wore ornate robes similar to what she'd worn today, and she was standing in what Yasuo imagined the grand throne room would look like: golden lanterns hanging from a tall ceiling, emerald green runners trailing down the walls, three rows of trestle tables with over a hundred chatting guests wearing a mixture of traditional and modern garb. Fuyoko stood near the throne, where a man sat in beautiful robes with tiny brass bells stitched along the arms and chest. Yasuo had not seen the former Daimyo in over ten years, but his round face and wiry beard were unmistakable. He was speaking with several black-skinned men in stuffy black suits.

Next to him, on a smaller but no-less-opulent chair, was his son, dressed similarly to his father. His head was leaning back and his mouth was open wide, his quiet snores overshadowed by the din of the crowd.

The room was sweltering, and it smelled of roast pork and vinegar and lemongrass. Most of the food had been taken away, but a few were still toying with the remains on their plates. Fuyoko chatted quietly with two other ladies, but then she realized her son was sleeping upon the throne. She snapped for a servant to attend her. She whispered to the boy, who then shot off toward the rear exit. He returned moments later with a handful of large grapes. Fuyoko took them and waved the boy away.

Then, one by one, she began lobbing the grapes toward her son's mouth. The first struck his headdress and rolled down his arm before plopping to the floor. The second hit his eye. The third hit his bottom lip just as he was waking.

The nearby crowd fell silent, and looks were exchanged, but Fuyoko was laughing. Then a boom brought the room to complete silence. The Daimyo was staring at Fuyoko, his face furious.

Yasuo yanked the glass off of Fuyoko's back, a sucking sound coming with it. He wiped away the round smudge of collected smoke from her back.

He yanked the second, and Fuyoko stirred.

"You're taking my skin off."

"If you wish to make a travesty of my profession"—he jerked another one free—"you can do it with another smokeman."

When he had pulled all the glasses off and stored them in his bag, Fuyoko sat up, gathering the silk sheet to her breast. "What was wrong with that?"

Yasuo closed his bag and left the room. The last thing he heard from the room as he closed the door behind him were the gravelly chuckles of an old, dying woman.

Yasuo woke the next morning to find that the spirit that visited his home from time to time had made another move on the Ojin board. Yasuo sipped his lime tea, admiring the move, trying to decide what his counter should be, but he couldn't concentrate. His mind kept drifting back to the previous day at the castle. He should not have left like he had. He had been dealing with emotional people his whole adult life. How had the Daimyo's mother gotten so far beneath his skin?

He knew the answer to that. Most people shunned him because of the obvious ties his profession had to death. They didn't want to deal with someone who reminded them so often of their mortality, or that of their parents or other loved ones. He had known and accepted that twenty years ago when he decided to become a smokeman. What he could not accept was someone scoffing at his profession as if it were a joke, as if it meant nothing.

Yet he had to wonder why she would do such a thing. She was cynical, yes, but there seemed to be more to it than that. The wine, and her drunken state, for one. Her wish to tarnish her late husband's image for another. Was it all simply to spite her son? To spite the village? Perhaps she was angry at death; that wasn't at all uncommon. And although it was rare, some simply refused to leave messages, refused to herald their passage into the Lands of the Dead. Yasuo decided he didn't care after all. If she wanted to pass over like a thief in the night, then so be it.

Moments later, the soft sound of paddles striking the water interrupted Yasuo's thoughts. He quickly made a move on the oval board

and rushed outside He traveled the well-worn path from his home to the small dock just as Fujumoto Harune and her daughter Rika arrived by rowboat While their attention was taken maneuvering the boat for their landing, Yasuo smoothed his linen shirt and made sure that the buttons lined up properly with his trousers

When the boat was close enough, Rika tossed him a rope, and Yasuo pulled them in and helped them disembark

"I would row her in, Fujumoto-san," Yasuo said "It would save you so much trouble "

Rika dropped to the edge of the dock and inspected the water for koi

"It is no trouble " Harune pulled the straw hat from her head, allowing it to hang down her back by its black cord. She wore sandals, simple leggings, and a white shirt stained with years of hard labor in her rice fields Despite her traditional and somewhat primitive garb, there was a certain pride in the set of her fine jaw and her matter-of-fact gaze. She bowed and held out her hand to Yasuo, which contained three coins

"It can wait until I'm done," Yasuo said "The memories don t always come."

She took Yasuo s hand and placed the coins there A warm tingle ran up his arm.

"They will come," she said

When Harune turned toward her boat, Yasuo motioned to his home "Please," he said a little too loudly, a little too abruptly. "I have tea You could rest a while before you head back to the village "

As always, Harune gave him a fleeting smile and shook her head "I have so much to do Another time, perhaps."

Yasuo's heart sank just a little, as always. "Of course," he said, and motioned young Rika into his home

As the sounds of paddling faded, Yasuo led Rika to his sitting room, which was clear except for a sunken hearth in the center of the room and a reed mat with a soft quilt on top of it While Rika sat on the mat and removed her sandals, Yasuo looked through the propped-open window The rowboat was already beyond the line of trees on the west shore of his island

"Don t you have work to do?" Rika asked

Yasuo turned to find her grinning up at him from her mat

"Why, I believe I do"—he made a show of scratching his head—"but for the life of me I can t remember what " He looked around the room as if he couldn't remember how he'd gotten here

Rika giggled "I remembered something about Father a few days ago, and Mother had to have it "

Yasuo frowned "And what does that have to do with me?"

"You re supposed to harvest it for me, silly."

"Ah, of course, I remember now." He kneeled next to her and gave her a most serious look "Tell me more."

Rika shrugged "I don t remember much. He was bouncing me on his knee, and I fell off. Hit my head and started bleeding "

"That's hardly a pleasant memory "

"That's what I told her But she said he was so worried about me that he carried me all the way home and bandaged me himself "

"You remember that part?"

"No Not very much of it."

Yasuo tried to hide his disappointment. It might be a good memory for Rika's father, but Yasuo did not approve of it for Rika herself No matter what Harune might wish, memories that shed a good light on Rika were far more important than even the most positive for her father But there was nothing for it at this point He had learned the hard way that Harune was no one to argue with

Yasuo retrieved a stack of sage and lit it from the dying embers in the hearth "It may still come," he told her. When she continued to stare at his preparations, he waved at her to disrobe She shrugged out of her white shirt a shirt not nearly as stained as her mother's—and lay down for him. He applied the precious dragon oil over her back, hoping her memory would come complete. Harune had been desperate ever since her husband had died four years earlier to harvest memories from her daughter Her husband had decided against

An extravagant longboat with a dragon figurehead and eight rowers was just pulling even with his small dock. Green streamers around the dragon's neck and tail fluttered in the meager breeze.

preparing any fireworks for himself. They were too poor, he'd always said Once Rika was grown and married away, once they managed to terrace additional paddies higher up the hillside, then they could afford it But he'd died in a foolish fight at a bar in the village Harune had been heartbroken ever since and had been trying to make up for her husband's shameful entry to Shin kin Plus, she had told him the first time she'd brought Rika to him, she would not have her child enter the Land of the Dead the way her husband had

When he was nearly finished, the sound of paddles came again, but this time it was clear that there were many paddles and they were in unison, indicating a single, large craft was on its way here He stood, still humming, and stepped over to the window. An extravagant longboat with a dragon figurehead and eight rowers was just pulling even with his small dock Green streamers around the dragon's neck and tail fluttered in the meager breeze. A platform occupied the center of the impressive craft Upon this was an ornate wooden chair, which was occupied by Asuhiko

Yasuo returned to Rika and tested the memory quickly It was as Rika had described, but only that—no recollection of her father s chase down the hillside, no yelling for Harune to help him, no mad dash for clean water and bandages He woke Rika from her reverie and told her to dress

Outside, two of the rowers stepped onto the dock and laid a plank from the dock to the platform in the center of the boat They bowed as Asuhiko strode across the plank and up the dock

"Wait here," Yasuo told Rika Then he strode to the dock

Asuhiko wore a top hat and a suit the color of hay. A diamond rooster pin rested in the center of his emerald green cravat

"How may I serve, Asuhiko-sama?"

He nodded toward Yasuo s home. "I hope I haven't disturbed your business, but my duties are taking me away for several days, and I'd hoped to discuss the Daimyo's mother before I left."

Yasuo bowed to hide the flush that had suddenly come to his face "Of course, Asuhiko-sama Of course "

"I understand she presented a bit of a challenge "

The shame at leaving his post came back to Yasuo in full force. The right thing to do, as he'd suggested to Ashuhiko two days ago, would be to summon a smokeman from the capital. But then a thought struck him, one so logical in the light of Fuyoko's behavior that it couldn't be ignored "Forgive my presumption, Asuhiko-sama, but I wasn't the first smokeman you summoned, was I?"

Asuhiko bowed his head ever so slightly The first time they had met, he seemed younger than his days, but now he seemed much older, much weaker. "The other returned to Ushito two weeks ago, incensed, and we've been unable to arrange his return."

"Me or another, it will do no good if Yoshida-dono will not cooperate "

"I've talked with her We've come to something of an arrangement "

"She wants the fireworks made?"

"Wants them? No But she will have them done, yes."

"If I might ask," Yasuo said carefully, "why doesn't she wish it?"

Asuhiko smiled, and for the first time the man seemed unsure of

Yasuo hadn't ignored his own death—he, of anyone, knew the preparations that one must make—but he had always been a private man, and he didn't feel like sharing them.

himself "I can only grasp at guesses, all of which would be pure conjecture, useless and perhaps damaging to share She has refused to give any sort of clues, but this is the other thing I wish to ask of you Any information she might give you Will you share it with me?"

Such a thing would be out of the ordinary, but this charge was out of the ordinary as well. "Of course," Yasuo replied

Asuhiko seemed pleased. "Good," he said and walked back to the longboat. "I will tell them to expect you tomorrow. I return in five days We will discuss your progress then."

Yasuo watched the boat depart, wondering if it wouldn't have been wiser to refuse Asuhiko But he rejected the notion as quickly as it had surfaced He was sure that despite Fuyoko's coarse extenor, there was something inside worth showing. He simply had to find it

He went back into his home, kneeled next to Rika, and placed the coins Harune had given him in her hand. "Don't tell your mother about the memories. I'll tell her they were fine."

Rika nodded, staring at the coins

"Slip those into your mother's coffer when you can, all right?"

Rika nodded again, clearly a bit scared by the prospect.

A short while later, Harune came and left quickly, stopping only to verify that Yasuo had retrieved a good memory from her daughter Yasuo felt horrible lying to her, but he couldn't explain Not now He would confront her once he'd had time to interview Rika more fully to find something more suitable

The next morning, after tea and completing another move on his game board, Yasuo went to the castle. He was shown to Fuyoko's room on the seventh level. The handmaid, standing in one corner, motioned to the open doors that led to the private balcony. Yasuo set his bag down, walked outside into the fresh breeze, and found Fuyoko leaning against the railing. She wore a traditional blue silk dress, her gray hair in an impeccable bun atop her head. She ignored his approach and instead continued to stare over the vast green landscape. Far below, the lake's islands huddled together, most of them connected by bright red bridges. Thin tendrils of fog slipped from the nearby pine forest and crawled through the cattails and lily pads toward the main body of the lake.

Yasuo remained silent, hoping she would speak first

Fuyoko motioned to the lake below "You were very angry when you rowed home the other day."

Yasuo stared down into the slate-blue water "How would you know that?"

"Because you rowed very quickly, and you went straight home to your island Normally you take your time and skim the western shoreline."

She was right He did do that, but why would the Daimyo's mother care where he rowed and how quickly? "Forgive me, Yoshida dono, but—"

She made a motion with her fingers like she was cutting with scissors. "What did I tell you about that?"

"Forgive me, Fuyoko, but why do you watch me when I travel home?"

"You think I shouldn't?"

"Well, no, but I rather thought the village's smokeman was beneath the castle's notice."

"I've often wondered what it would be like to have grown up in the village instead of up here in the castle"—Fuyoko tilted her head, only a little, but it was a vague sort of apology for this small invasion of his privacy—"and you row by often enough I began to wonder what it would be like to gather memories. It seems like it would hold so much mystery and intrigue."

Yasuo chuckled. "Mystery? No, not very often But wonder, yes There is always something new in people's minds, things I hadn't thought of before."

"Like what?"

"Did you experience Shukujo's funeral the other day?"

Fuyoko nodded

"He had many good memories, but he was so filled with hate for his brother that it was hard to find them at first."

"His brother the banker?"

Yes. He'd asked for a small loan for his farm five years earlier, and Iniki hadn't granted it to him. He built up so much anger that he was ready to die without speaking another word to him. I asked him if he'd like to relive the memory, to be sure it was as he remembered it. He eventually said yes, and he realized how difficult it had been for Iniki to say no With the drought the previous two seasons, he'd had little enough money to go around."

"And that's wondrous?"

"On the surface, no. But to me it was a wonder what Shukujo had done to himself; his mind put himself so high up on his mountain of pride that he could no longer find his way down. It's a wonder that I could help him, a wonder that they reconciled before he died. Such things don't happen often, but when they do I'm reminded of why I chose the profession I did."

"Does it outweigh the rest?"

Yasuo blinked. "What do you mean?"

Fuyoko laughed, it was a sharp and biting thing. "Does it outweigh living on the island, alone? Does it outweigh being called only when someone is dying? Does it outweigh being ostracized by a village that would rather you didn't exist until necessity demands it?"

Yasuo fixed his stare on the largest island in the lake, where two small boys were chasing one another around the trunk of a cherry tree "I like my island," he said after a time

"You mean you tolerate it. There's a difference."

"No, I like it Not everyone is a social creature, O-dono I may not be invited to birthdays and New Year feasts, but what I do is necessary It is important that what I do is done well I am needed, and that is enough."

"Is that what you tell yourself when Harune comes to drop off her Rika?

Yasuo felt his face flush. "Fujumoto-san is a client."

Fuyoko emitted a deep, rumbling chuckle "So you've said, but the blood in your face says otherwise

Fuyoko's eyes twinkled as she watched Yasuo squirm, and he hated her for it, but he had dealt with worse, and he would find a way to deal with her

He motioned to the waiting room behind them. "We do have work to do, O-dono."

"Ah, yes. That." She stood up taller, still only coming to his breastbone, and put on a face of mock-seriousness "I'll make you a bargain, smokeman. My son wants my memories, Asuhiko wants my memories, you want my memories, so I'll give them to you, but on one condition."

"And that would be?"

"For each memory I give, you have to answer one question, and you have to answer it to my satisfaction."

Yasuo didn't like the satisfied smile on Fuyoko's face, and his stom-

ach was already churning at the questions she might ask, but he knew he had no real choice.

On the island below, one of the boys caught up to the other, at which point, the chase reversed. Even from his vantage Yasuo could hear their faint giggles.

"I'll agree," Yasuo said, "but only for memories that aren't hurtful."

"That seems fair."

"Then consider the bargain struck."

She slapped his back. Hard. "Well then, I suppose we'd better get to it."

"Yes," Yasuo said, trying to recover his composure, "then perhaps we could start where we ended last time. Why do you wish to tarnish your husband's legacy?"

She made a hmmph sound. "His legacy ... You might have chosen a different word had you waited until the end of the memory to storm off."

"And what would I have seen?"

"My husband beating me in front of the entire court, me being dragged away to his room. And it only grew worse when he retired that evening."

Yasuo paused before speaking again. This was dangerous ground he was treading. If the Daimyo ever found out he knew such secrets, even the normally high protections of the smokemen would do little to save him.

"Revealing anything about your husband will do little good when you pass over," Yasuo said.

"Don't you think we should be truthful?" she asked.

"There are truths and there are truths. We want to uncover your nature, your true self, so that it is plain to see."

"That was my truth—for many years—until I produced him two sons and he finally lost interest in me."

"But that was not you, was it? Did your husband's behavior define you? Does it still?"

"I don't know who I am anymore."

"It is natural to be confused at a time like this. The important thing to remember is your life beyond, the one that cradles you until your next life begins."

"I care little for the next life, and even less for the one beyond that."

Yasuo couched his next words in the softest voice he could manage. "Then do it for your son if you love him."

Fuyoko was silent for a time. The boys dashed across the bridge and were lost among the pines.

"I loved him once. But he has become so much like his father."

"Perhaps you don't relate to him like you once did, but was his birth not joyous?"

Fuyoko stood and looked upon Yasuo with a clarity he hadn't seen before. She nodded once. "Yes, we can begin with that."

Yasuo took her through the ritual again, massaging her back, getting her body to the right point of relaxation. He used the incense and the cups and placed them along her back.

As the smoke was collecting, Yasuo read another of the poems on the wall.

Angry clouds
Flying ever east
Their bellies pregnant with rain
They would storm upon us if they knew

When the right time had passed, Yasuo tested the memory. Fuyoko had focused well upon the memory of her son's birth. She seemed truly happy, but when her husband came to view his son for the first time, she grew stiff and defensive, even fearful. It was, in terms of her memories, useless; there was no way he could show such a thing to the public, much less the Daimyo himself. But in terms of Fuyoko's attitude, this was a step forward. He could only hope that the coming days would provide more luscious fruit from which to choose.

Yasuo left the castle shortly after. As he was crossing the stone bridge leading from the castle to the village proper, he noticed Harune standing on the far side just next to her cart. He grew worried the closer he came, for her face was set grimly.

"Fujumoto-san, how may I serve?"

She held her hand out, palm up, revealing the coins he had given to Rika. She glanced up at the castle and said, "Do my daughter's memories mean so little?"

"Harune, I—"

"You said the oils were very expensive, and the sage."

"I thought she could come back another—"

"I told you I would pay like any other when you came for Rika's memories." She glanced up at the castle again. "We're not as rich as some, but the Fujimoto aren't beggars." She looked like she wanted to say more, but instead she threw the coins at Yasuo's feet, climbed up to the driver's seat of her cart, and whipped the ox into motion.

Yasuo stood there, hurt and confused. He hadn't meant any offense. Truth be told, he'd hoped to simply see her again when she came to drop Rika off. Otherwise, months would have passed before he would see her again.

Harune's cart was soon onto market street and then lost as it turned right toward her home. Only then did Yasuo pick up the coins and return to his boat. As he rowed home, he refused to look up to see if Fuyoko was watching from her balcony.

Yasuo returned to the castle the next morning, which was a chilly and windy affair. Part of him said he should walk to the Fujimoto farm and explain to Harune, but another part said she needed time alone, time to digest what she'd done. After she was calm, then he could talk to her and she would be able to understand.

"You owe me a question, smokeman," Fuyoko said after he'd entered the room.

Yasuo took off his wool coat and bowler and handed them to the handmaid to hang. "Good day to you as well."

Fuyoko waved his hello away with a flick of her hand. "No stalling. I want to know what memories you will choose."

"What?"

"When you die, which memories will you choose?"

"I ... You want to waste a question on that?"

"I'll waste my questions if I want. Now answer."

Yasuo hadn't ignored his own death—he, of anyone, knew the preparations that one must make—but he had always been a private man, and he didn't feel like sharing them. Still, he had agreed to Fuyoko's strange bargain.

"The one that strikes me as most important is my wife's death."

Fuyoko's eyebrows rose. "She died in childbirth, didn't she?"

It again struck him how in tune Fuyoko was with his personal life. It still felt uncomfortable. "Yes."

"But why? Why that memory?"

"Because it shows how much I respected her."

"Respected?"

"Well, yes."

"Not loved?"

Yasuo felt his face flush. "I loved her in my own way, but love can be overvalued. She was a good wife to me, and I was a good husband. It was a better marriage than most."

"Is that why you don't visit Harune more often? Out of respect?"

"That," Yasuo said as he turned toward his bag to hide his shame, "is another question."

Days passed, one running into the next, broken up only by the occasional practical joke from Fuyoko. One day she put jade marbles just inside her door, causing Yasuo to fall painfully on his back side and break three of the glass jars he used to extract memories. When he returned from a trip to his home to pick up more jars, she seemed cowed, but only until the end of the session, when she farted so loudly it scared her handmaid into a small yelp. All three of them remained silent for unbearable seconds as the handmaid stared at Yasuo and Fuyoko with a perfectly embarrassed look on her face. Then, like bursting rain clouds, all three of them devolved into

uncontrollable laughing fits

It occurred to Yasuo that humor might be the key to finding decent memories for Fuyoko, but the straight-backed nature of the Daimyo and the lords of Kaidon wouldn't allow them to accept such a display. They would consider it an embarrassment, no matter how true to Fuyoko's nature it might be. No, he had to go another direction. He managed to elicit positive memories from Fuyoko, but in actuality they were either soured by her interactions with her husband or were so bland as to say nothing useful about her life.

Fuyoko hadn't asked another question since the first, and he wondered if she'd given up on the notion. But the day Asuhiko was to return, she said, "It seems to me you owe me quite a few questions, smokeman."

Yasuo forced a smile while his gut tightened. "Is my life really so important to you?"

Fuyoko's face had been bright and mischievous, but it relaxed then. "I am only curious about you, Osokura-san. Is that so foreign?"

She seemed so genuine about it that Yasuo smiled. "Go on, then."

"Why does Harune bring her daughter to you?"

"To prepare memories."

"Doesn't she have enough?"

"She is not rich. She can only afford a memory or two per season."

"They say she still grieves over her husband."

Yasuo shrugged. "It seems to be so. She always chooses the memories for Rika, memories that pay homage to him as much or more than her daughter."

"Why do you think she does so?"

"To show those in Shin-kin what sort of a man he was. To give him his due even though he had no proclamation on his day of passing."

Fuyoko paused for a while, perhaps soaking in what Yasuo had said. "Why don't you call upon her?"

Yasuo's gut felt like a twisted New Year cookie. "I don't .. Harune-san is often

We've determined that

San doesn't. My feelings for Fujimoto-san have no bearing."

"I don't think she would love you?"

"I told you, my wife—"

"Is dead, yes. But you're not."

"Harune," Yasuo began, not sure he was willing to voice the thought, "is as much a part of this village as everyone else."

"Meaning what? That she would spurn your affection?"

"Yes."

"How will you know until you try? I wonder when you, a man who deals with death every day of his life—isn't that what you told me the first day we met?—isn't willing to embrace what he has left of it. I would if I were you."

All the humiliation he'd felt over Fuyoko's unwelcome probing came bubbling to the surface, and before he could prevent it, a laugh burst from Yasuo like a bark. "If you were me."

"Yes."

"You would do something you've avoided your whole life."

Fuyoko straightened her back. "I've been a prisoner—"

"Yes, I know. Your horrible husband ruined your life. But you were the Daimyo's wife. Outside of your marriage, you could have had anything you chose. You haven't wanted for anything your whole life. You want to know why there aren't any pure memories? It's simple. It's because you've swallowed your own vile tonic for so long you've convinced yourself none of it was worthwhile. None of it! But the truth is there's plenty of joy and love and respect in your life. Your first day as a woman, the day you left your prefecture for Kaidon, your first trip to Ushuto, your first kiss. Everything can be taunted if you look back upon it with a sour mind-set. It's up to you to find the memories and to let them shine, as they truly happened exactly as you felt them then."

Fuyoko was silent for a long time. She looked at him with steely eyes, but then they softened and turned thoughtful. She stared up at the poems adorning the wall. She kept her eyes on one of them for so long that Yasuo turned to regard it.

A spring day
Breaks with golden light
It warms my heart and yours
As its arms reach outward to embrace

"You're right, smokeman," Fuyoko finally said. "There are memories that are pure." She turned her gaze back upon him, her eyes glistening. She nodded once, disrobed, and then lay down. "Begin, and you will see why I wish to stay."

He was confused at first, but this was an opportunity he had to grasp. The summoning of her memory went so smoothly and worked so well that when he touched the jars on her back and opened his mind he was drawn into her past immediately.

He saw the beautiful clouds described by the first poem, felt a warm breeze, heard crickets.

It was a complete surprise. Yasuo had assumed someone had created the poems as a gift for her. He had no idea that she'd actually experienced the poems. Fuyoko was not the one creating the poem, so perhaps she had made them at another time, attempting to capture the memory in prose. But wait. No. If Yasuo concentrated, he could sense the sooty smell of ink on the air. Fuyoko was not the one creating the poem after all. But if not her, then who?

"Continue," Fuyoko said after he'd collected the memory away in its jar.

He complied, quickly and efficiently collecting the oil and preparing the jars once more. When he set the last jar, he whispered a small prayer that she would progress into more personal memories.

The second was as strong as the first. The storm clouds infused Yasuo. He could feel the lightning tickle the nape of his neck and the wind tug at his hair. The wind was too strong to smell ink, but Yasuo heard a faint clinking sound, as of a brush against an ink bottle.

"Again," she said.

The third showed the river bank, which the final poem described, and it was as immersive a memory as Yasuo had ever experienced. He truly felt like he was a part of it, like he could reach out and brush the tips of his fingers over the cattails, like he could hear every leaf on the willow as it rustled in the wind. It was with great regret that he pulled back from the memory and began collecting the oil.

Yet once he was free of the pull of the memories, Yasuo began to worry. There was no doubt that they were strong and beautiful, but a funeral was not about isolated beauty. It was about speaking to one's spirit, to one's life, and Yasuo didn't really have anything that would speak confidently to Fuyoko's.

Yasuo was so lost in his musings that it was only when he had finished bottling the essence away that he realized Fuyoko's aged form was wracking with silent sobs on the couch.

"O-dono, please, what is the matter?"

"Go," she replied through open sobs. "Just go."

He bowed though she could not see him and put his instruments away. "I am most sorry if I—"

"I said go!"

He bowed once more and opened the door. He closed it and started when he realized someone was just behind him.

"Asuhiko-sama. I didn't realize you were there."

Asuhiko smiled—forced, it seemed to Yasuo—and nodded toward the door. Fuyoko's sobs could be heard easily. "I hope there is some good news."

Yasuo stepped away from the door. "Please. She has only now become upset. We created three—wo, rather—strong memories. I think I can use them somewhere within her ceremony."

"The poems?" Asuhiko said.

Yasuo stood dumstruck for a moment. "How did you know?"

Asuhiko smiled. "One need know Yoshida-dono only for a small amount of time to know those poems are precious to her." Then Asuhiko's expression grew stern, and he raised himself up taller. "You truly think they would prove useful in her proclamation?"

Yasuo paused, for Asuhiko clearly thought they would not prove useful. Yasuo would even go so far as to say Asuhiko was request-

ing they not make an appearance on her night of passing

"It is true they say little, O sama If the truth be told, I would rather find more insightful memories for her "

There was almost no change in Asuhiko s bearing, but Yasuo got the distinct sense that he was relieved. "I will speak with her Return in the morning, and I m sure you ll be able to make good progress."

"Of course, of course."

Yasuo left, though he was not at all as confident as Asuhiko that progress could be made. He was not sure that it could ever be made

The next morning, Yasuo was staring at the game board, his mind everywhere but on the latest move the spirit had made, when he heard the sounds of a drum and of many paddles cutting the water. He went outside thinking Asuhiko had come to speak with him, but he was shocked to find the Daimyo himself sitting atop the platform. Asuhiko stood just behind him while eight men rowed and a ninth beat a drum to guide the timing of their strokes. The Daimyo strode along Yasuo's dock in full regalia, his face painted in stark white makeup except for his lips and the pits of his eyes, which were a flaming red.

The colors of mourning.

Yasuo lowered his eyes and bowed deeply

"You may look upon me, Osokura-san," the Daimyo said after a healthy pause

Yasuo did so, knowing in his heart why the Daimyo had come

"My mother passed in the night. smokeman, and her celebration will be in two days "

"Forgive me, O-dono, but I didn't think she was in such poor health She seemed to have plenty of life in her yet."

The Daimyo stared down at Yasuo, perhaps considering how to phrase his next words. "She took her own life early this morning. The pain was too great, I believe, and she wished to rejoin my father in the lands of Shin-kin "

Yasuo bowed his head. "Of-of course, O-dono "

"Asuhiko-san doubts that you are ready He doesn't think you have enough memories for a proper display. Tell me he is false, Osokura-san. Tell me you have enough to send my mother across in the way she deserves."

Yasuo swallowed, hoping dearly his nerves wouldn t be noticed by the Daimyo. "She will have a grand display, O-dono There can be no doubt " They were the only words he could speak at a time like this

The Daimyo paused, perhaps reading him, and then he smiled "Good That is good " And with that he returned to the boat

Asuhiko didn't have a chance to say a word, but Yasuo could tell he was nervous

Yasuo was as well, probably more so than Asuhiko Asuhiko might escape this with his life Yasuo almost assuredly would not He had just lied to the Daimyo And two days from now, when the display was revealed, everyone would know it

Yasuo brought all the jars containing Fuyoko's memories to his sitting room and played them over and over, hoping some surge of inspiration would strike him. Perhaps it was resignation to his fate, perhaps it was Fuyoko's words on their final meeting, but his mind kept swinging toward Harune, and nothing he did could swing it back

He did have feelings for Harune And he was glad he could finally voice it, if only to himself He had wanted, for so long, to talk with her. to ask her on a walk, to prepare for her one of the meager meals he had learned to cook since his wife's death He wondered what Harune would say. She was angry with him, and justifiably so. Yasuo had dishonored her and the memory of her husband And it made it doubly painful for her since he was all she d worned about since his death

Yasuo remembered Fuyoko s questions, how horribly uncomfortable they had made him. But all that had changed It felt like a weight had been lifted His direction, at least in this one small part of his life, was now clear

Yasuo waited until the next day to visit the Fujumoto farm. They had a sizable plot, but like most of the land in Tashyoko Valley, it hugged

He had been trying to suppress her memories of their relationship, their affair, just as vigorously as Fuyoko had been trying to release them. They were at opposite ends of a private tug-of-war ...

a steep slope. The terraced rice paddies were full with tall stalks of rice, nearly ready for harvest

Yasuo called out for long minutes, but no one seemed to be home But then, just as he was ready to head into the rice fields to search for her, Harune stepped out from the nearest paddy along with her daughter Rika smiled; Harune did not. Harune shooed her daughter off toward their modest home, after which she removed her straw sandals and met Yasuo at the gate

"Why are you here?" She dipped her feet in a large bucket of water and began scrubbing the mud from them as if Yasuo wasn't even there.

"I've come to apologize "

"It s Rika you should apologize to, Osokura-san, not me."

Yasuo set down his leather bag and took a deep breath, trying to summon Fuyoko's forward nature. "It's not about the coins I would do that again in a heartbeat."

Harune stood, her gaze piercing

"I've come to apologize about something else," he said before she could speak. "I've been thinking about the memories you've asked me to harvest They were for your husband as much as your children "

"I told you. His story must be told."

"And I've explained that it won't matter. Not anymore. He is well on his way to his new life in Shin-kin Time passes differently there, and different things are important. Bringing up his past will not help him."

Harune crossed her arms She was trying to portray strength, but he could see the look of guilt in the tightness of her shoulders, in the sadness that touched her eyes

"But," Yasuo said, "the veil that separates us from Shin-kin has two sides There are those in the living world to consider "

Harune's face grew angry. "Which is why I want the children to honor their father "

Yasuo shook his head. "No, you want to honor him. I should have said this to you in the beginning, but I was too worned about how that might hurt you. I was too worned that you would never want to see me again. So you see, I wish to apologize for my weakness, Fujumoto Harune. I should have been stronger for the sake of you and your family But I won't make that mistake any longer. You need to tell him what's burning a hole inside you Stop wasting your money and your children's feelings. It won't relieve your grief, not in the long run "

"I've hidden nothing from my husband," Harune said.

"Hide, no. But there are words you wish to share with him, are there not?"

Harune stared at Yasuo, her eyes beginning to glisten. Her nostrils flared and she took several deep breaths, perhaps considering his words But then she stabbed her finger toward the village. "Go."

Yasuo motioned to his bag "I can help, today if you wish. I can capture the message you wish to send him and send it into the night sky so he'll see."

"Go!" she shouted. And when he didn't, she picked up her san-

dals and stalked into her house, slamming the door behind her.

Yasuo stared at the house for several long breaths. He had hoped that she would agree, of course, but a part of him had known that she would react this way. She was a proud woman, and speaking of shame, even to a smokeman, would be a very difficult thing for her. Still, he didn't regret trying; she might, at the very least, summon another smokeman to help her

As Yasuo trekked back toward the village, it struck him how similar Harune and Fuyoko were. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Both women were extremely strong-willed, and weren't afraid to show it—at least to him. Both of them were hiding something and neither was willing to admit it. Both were using their children, though in admittedly different ways.

There was one strong difference, though. Harune was making choices because of pride—her own, her husband's, her family's. But with Fuyoko it was something else. Not to protect herself, certainly; whether it was her nature or the disease, she didn't seem to care much what happened to her or what others thought. But if not herself, then who?

The image of Asuhiko pulling himself taller as he asked Yasuo about the memories played through his mind. As did the three strong memories that Fuyoko had chosen before taking her life

I've lived lies my whole life, she'd said.

He stopped in the middle of the road, dumbfounded. The poems, how beautiful they'd been, how personal. Given their age, she must have kept them for some time, decades perhaps. Asuhiko had known immediately which memories Yasuo had gathered. And he had just as quickly dissuaded him from using them. And the telltale signs of another person in the memory: the smell of ink and the tap of the brush

The poet could be no other than Asuhiko.

It made perfect sense now. The access he had to her, the ease with which he seemed to convince her of things, the constraints he'd placed on Yasuo for her memories. He had been trying to suppress her memories of their relationship, their affair, just as vigorously as

Yasuo was asked by the Daimyo to attend him near his dais, and Yasuo did so, though it was with no small amount of nervousness. He caught himself again and again glancing at the Daimyo in attempts at gauging his mood, but doing so was foolish and rude, and the last thing he needed now, he reminded himself, was added scrutiny. He scanned the crowd instead for Harune, but she had not yet come, probably would not because of his presence here.

After an interminable wait, made doubly worse by the largest crowd Yasuo could ever remember seeing on the parade grounds, the first firework burst bright and beautiful over the clear night sky

It swallowed him immediately.

Dawn. Golden clouds lit from below by the sun that had yet to rise. A warm breeze. Crickets play their song among the pine trees. A feeling of deep comfort, of immense satisfaction, of satiation, as the sun kisses the horizon.

The firework had long ended, and the crowd was still, savoring the memory that had just been granted them. As Yasuo had instructed, the second streaked upward some time later.

A mountaintop, covered with short, scrubby grass. Kaishyoko far below, nestled and protected by the arms of the valley. A dark storm blows in from the west. Lightning dances among the clouds, and the smell of a dread rain stands strong in the air.

When it had finished, Yasuo could not help but look at the Daimyo. His face held a deep frown, and with good reason; it was the least positive of the three memories, and would be the most difficult to explain.

The next firework rose and released its memory upon the crowd.

A lush river bank. Water gurgles over nearby rocks. Dragonflies swoop over the slick surface as a fragrant breeze tugs at the cattails. A heron crawls through the shallows, just beneath a willow tree that reaches with tender longing toward the darkness of the water.

It was the strongest memory, the one that would pull the Daimyo in the deepest. It had been the right one to end with.

Much time passed in silence until eventually everyone realized the

A lush river bank. Water gurgles over nearby rocks. Dragonflies swoop over the slick surface as a fragrant breeze tugs at the cattails. A heron crawls through the shallows, just beneath a willow tree that reaches with tender longing toward the darkness of the water.

Fuyoko had been trying to release them. They were at opposite ends of a private tug-of-war: Asuhiko trying protecting their secrecy while Fuyoko searched for a way to declare her love.

Yasuo hurried the rest of the way to his island and immediately went to his workroom at the rear of his home. Upon a set of pine shelves, Fuyoko's memories sat in jars, waiting to be folded into the firework mixture. He had seventeen from their earlier sessions together, most of them rubbish. One shelf lower were the three most recent memories, the ones she'd granted him just before taking her own life.

A shiver charged up Yasuo's frame. Fuyoko had wanted to leave a message as well, just like Harune, and he realized how truly, eerily similar the two women were. Similar, he thought to himself ironically, but now on opposite sides of the veil.

Well, he told himself as he strode toward the shelves, one of them, at least, could no longer refuse his help

The following night, with the weather unseasonably warm, the whole of Kaishyoko gathered on the parade grounds by the lake wearing their best suits and their finest dresses. The men were freshly shaved and groomed; the women wore new ribbons of green in their hair. They were uncommonly silent.

proclamation was over. Murmurs traveled among the crowd until a servant struck the huge brass gong on the Daimyo's dais three times, and then silence reigned.

Yasuo was summoned to stand before the Daimyo. He had chosen to wear the ornate headdress and robes but had deigned to use makeup so that his mother could see his face as it truly was one last time. Several guards stood upon the dais well behind his carved wooden throne. Asuhiko stood nearby, watching Yasuo with a keen eye.

"Explain yourself, smokeman," the Daimyo said, his tone dangerous. "Excellency?"

The Daimyo's face reddened. Yasuo's heart sped up, but he had to keep it in check. This would only work if the Daimyo were convinced beyond any doubt that Yasuo had chosen correctly.

"There were only three fireworks, three memories."

"If I may be so bold," Yasuo said, gazing out over the crowd before eyeing the Daimyo once more, "the common folk need many memories. They create but little in their time, and so must barrage the sky with their accomplishments in hopes of convincing those on the other side that they have been worthy."

A low hum began to rise in the crowd until the Daimyo stood and

stepped forward. The bells on his robe jingled until he came to a rest.

His face ... By the spirits beyond, could no one see the stunning resemblance to Asuhiko?

The Daimyo studied Yasuo's eyes, judging his sincerity. "And the memories you chose?"

Yasuo bowed his head once. "A willow, as beautiful as she was for all of her days. The daybreak, a memory of the birth of her son." He said the words with strong conviction, for they were words of truth.

A murmur of approval spread through the crowd.

"And the storm?"

Yasuo smiled and breathed deeply of the warm night air. "The wind of the Daimyo," he lied, "mighty and strong against his enemies. All three, in their own way, are professions of love and pride."

Heads were nodding now, and though the Daimyo tried to hide his emotions, he was clearly pleased. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, perhaps wishing his mother goodbye now that he was confident her passing had been honored. He turned without another word and left, and the crowd broke soon thereafter.

Asuhiko lingered, waiting for enough people to leave that he could take Yasuo by the arm and lead him away from prying ears. They walked along the lakeshore until they were finally alone.

"Thank you for keeping our secret."

"The secret was as plain as day, Asuhiko-sama."

"And thank you for passing the memories she left me. I had no idea she held them so dear."

After an uncomfortable silence, Asuhiko turned and left.

Yasuo waited until Asuhiko was out of earshot. "It was so tender," he said to Asuhiko's retreating form, "so rarely seen. Only the poorest of men would have withheld such a beautiful thing."

Several weeks passed, and Yasuo was lonelier than he had ever been. He hadn't realized how much he would miss Fuyoko and her strange ways. And for some reason his game board remained unchanged; the spirit had not visited his house since before the funeral.

One morning Yasuo was making tea over his hearth when a knock at his door made him shiver. He turned and found Harune standing outside his doorway.

"Fujumoto-san." He stood and stepped toward her, suddenly very self-conscious.

There was an awkward silence, and then Harune cleared her throat. "I've thought about what you said."

Yasuo waited in silence, not wanting to break the spell.

"You were right. There were things I hadn't admitted to myself, about my husband."

"Yes, of course." Yasuo motioned her inside. "We can begin now if you'd like."

She smiled, the friendliest smile he could ever remember upon her face. "No, I've told him over the fires, like the ancients used to do."

Yasuo frowned, confused.

"I don't want you to take my memories, Osokura-san. I've given all of them I wish to give. It's time to leave that behind."

"Then forgive me, but why have you come?"

Harune ducked her head so their eyes no longer met. Her cheeks reddened. Realization came as they stood together in silence. As far as she'd come, as clear as her intentions now were, she could not bring herself to speak the question out loud.

"The lake is beautiful today," Yasuo said. "Perhaps we could row upon it."

And just then, as if sent from the land beyond, a gentle breeze brought the fresh scent of the lake with it. Despite the butterflies in his stomach, Yasuo allowed himself a deep, satisfying breath. At the edge of his senses, he could hear Harune doing the same.

"I would like that, Osokura-san," Harune said as she exhaled. "I would like that very much."

"Please," he said as they walked toward the lake, "call me Yasuo."

the snake

Continued from page 47

It was then that Keshorn heard a voice call to him, and only to him, from Zerezel's inner chamber.

The other five attendants had fallen asleep. Only he, burdened with his misery, had not.

Nor could he tell, disoriented as he had become, quite whose voice it was that called, whether that of male or female, or even if it were that of some ghost which wailed from the forest.

He rapped on the door, and his hand was cold.

"Enter," said the voice. "*Thus.*"

The magician had not, even as the sage had not, been able to predict all things. That Zerezel would almost die, for example, had not entered his calculations. But that her father must thereafter send for help was nearly traditional. And by some kind of influence too, Drahk had then made sure one messenger at least should find him.

A single question however remained outstanding.

The fox child in the tower had warned Drahk that Zerezel could not love him, could love only her first lover—even dead. And since these stone creatures were all-knowing, even vain, self-blinded Drahk believed it, and accordingly slew her first lover. Why then and how had Drahk's own kiss *restored* Zerezel to life, let alone to utter instant love of *him*—a love that even denied the former lover, forgot or wanted him slain? She, who had been so faithful. Love stronger than death—

Now the answer to that lingering question lay before Keshorn. Though he did not quite see it yet.

He saw only the room, the marriage bed—untouched, unused—and Zerezel the maiden, who stood there wrapped in a silken shawl, the ends of which pooled over and around her feet. The lamps were out, but red moonlight filled the room from three of nine windows. No other was present. The Magician Thus, or Drahk, was not to be seen.

"I wish to thank you, Keshorn," said Zerezel, in a mild, low tone, "for bringing him to me. For delivering him up to me. Thus man who, in the form of a little yellow snake, slew my only beloved with his venom."

"Lady—" cried Keshorn, galvanized. "I failed you, rather. For I told you nothing of my suspicion of him. Let alone that he had killed your prince—for I swear that *this* I never guessed."

"You need tell me nothing. You had only, as you did, to confirm the mage was facile in the craft of shape-shift. And vulnerable, too. Capable of dying." (Outside the forest made no sound, listening with all its million million leaves. And the moon, like Keshorn, stared with an amazed wild face.)

"I had learned who was the murderer—yes, even in the oblivious nothing where I wandered. And also how the murder had been done. I knew from the moment I felt the touch of his lips. For *on* his lips I tasted the skin of my one true love, and mingled with the unique fragrance of his flesh—the taint of some dire poison. It seems my lover's body was the last human element the magician had touched with his mouth, before that mouth kissed mine. Oh," she said, and from her eyes the moon-hot tears fell out like blood, "at once I woke and flung back to regain the world and view the assassin. I gazed at him with burning loathing, and with deep hunger for his death—which others, and even he, mistook for *love*. And when he came to me tonight I wooed and coaxed him to put on the shape he used to work his crime. Boastfully he did so. And when he coiled there on the floor, slender and little and scaled and venomous, I went to him with cries of praise and delight, and see—" she let drop the shawl and it slid away—"*how I rewarded him.*"

And there on the floor in the strange light, spine-snapped and crushed in one second under her heel, lay a golden snake, dead as yesterday, unmade as tomorrow.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophet

BY WAY JENG
ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARMON

Nobody knows the first prophesy

then I'll get in big trouble.

the world of a little more perfection.

ting dealt 16s in blackjack.

faded into obscurity.

the third time he caught sight of females from across the room. She

quent singles bars.

burst out laughing.

up for it.

maybe a bit vulnerable.

worst that could happen.

tion schedule.

s that right?

ings girls and beseech

flash one.

find my muse again.

me back out of me.

or value plays.

know? Anybody

know why Colin broke the mage

From the Disc of Wisdom: Volume III, Chap-

table here"

for it."

and worried about the future.

related the story to Jennifer.

She listened to the tale, and when he finished she said, "You did-

n't really break the mage, did you?"

"No, of course not."

a shower of pennies and nickels.

worst day.

"coincidence."

"And they always do."

comes true."

ook in his career, because it's done.

ysm, and it doesn't matter.

positive."

hates me."

think it is?"

holy leader."

it gets, it can always get worse."

The Good Neighbor

BY BETSY JAMES

ILLUSTRATION BY [illegible]

ladder from my place—and my uncle Yanie was bleeding the bull. The bull was young an
left and right. My uncle was a little
filled a clay jar with blood.
and my uncles would make me
pasture herself.

I held on to the back of her shift. "No, no."

She chortled. I let her go and she took off again half under the fence, crawling for the gods' house. Its door opens on the pasture so the bull can guard it.

"Not in there. They'll eat you!" I caught her up and made the worst face I could, all teeth.

She screamed. I unmade the face to my ordinary one, round and spotty, with duck down on my lip and my teeth crooked where Dres hit me with a board that time. She patted my mouth with her fat hands. "Teedy, Teedy!" After tomorrow she couldn't call me that. I'd have a real name, Tedemke Layusa Bram. But I wouldn't see Suka so much anyway, being a man and living in the Holds.

Uncle Yanle untied the bull from the post, slapped his shoulder, and walked away with the bloody jar. The bull stood as if tranced, then jumped and ran to the pasture end, tossing his horns and snorting. Uncle went to the door of the gods' house, lifted the latch, entered, and shut the door behind him.

In a low voice Dres said, "What do you think he's doing in there?"

We all knew what he was doing in there. I said, "Painting them. Mine. For tomorrow."

"You sure?"

"What else?"

Dres wouldn't be a man for another half year. I couldn't tell if he was envious about that, or relieved, or what. He'd brought his own clay jar, not for bull's blood but to trap glow moths in, that baby game. He looked away from me, put the jar to his lips and whispered into the hollow of it, "Do you think they drink the blood?"

"Who?"

"Our uncles. In the gods' house."

"You're crazy!" I'd thought he meant, Did the good neighbors drink the blood? I'd just told Suka they'd eat her. "The blood's to mix into the paint, Babyface. To make it holy."

"Our uncles say that." Dres stared into the jar. "But... when you change into a god, wouldn't there be something serious you'd have to do? To make yourself change, I mean."

He didn't say, And tomorrow it'll be you, Teedy.

I tried not to think about this. I was an uncle already, Suka's, and tomorrow I'd be a man. I'd tried not to think because I got afraid—about blood, or worse things. It would be better just to go with Uncle Yanle and do whatever he said, get it over with.

Away in the dark meadow the glow moths were winking on, one by one. Behind me Yebbe said in his hoarse little frog's voice, "Men don't change into gods." He was the youngest of us and would come last to the Hoids, but he was the boldest. "At the equinox, when the gods come? It's just our old uncles dancing, pretending to be gods. With masks on."

Dres and I looked away from him. I made Suka look away, too. It was blasphemy, and besides you're not supposed to say the word "mask." You say "good neighbor," or just "them."

As if to the moths Yebbe said, "Imagine fat old Uncle Faradei changing into a god. With his stinky rotten-teeth breath."

"Or Ebre," Dres snickered suddenly. Ebre is Yai's uncle, the village drunk.

It was true that among the gods who showed themselves at the dances there was a skinny one who couldn't dance straight, and a fat one whose breath stank when he gave you your equinox gift. I knew they were Ebre and Uncle Faradei. We all did. Since I was seven or eight I'd known, but without allowing myself to know.

Do you see what I mean? Did you ever know something with one part of your mind, and another thing with another part, yet keep the parts separate? I knew there were uncles in the world, and there were gods and . . . and good neighbors, and a kind of connection between all of them that was not to be looked at or wondered about. What I knew was, when you turned twelve your uncles did something to you and then took you into the gods' house, and after that you didn't have to ask those questions, because you were a man.

I stayed looking away, blowing on Suka's neck to make her squeal. It was the gods' house I looked at, stuck onto the Holds like one cell of a mud wasp's nest. It had one tiny window, barred, high up under the eaves. Its door never stood open, and was never locked.

The one part of my mind knew the gods lived in there. The other part knew that our uncles, merry or angry or drunk, went in there to paint them, to trim them with ribbons or fox fur. I could feel those two parts of my mind get aware of each other and begin to circle, like a pair of dogs.

"Faradei!" Yebbe mocked, poking out his gut.

"Ebre!" Dres staggered about and toppled into the evening grass. Suka went grasping after him.

The mind dogs had found each other, they were sniffing under each others' tails, and I didn't want them to. If the uncles were just uncles, then where was the godhood? What was I to be given tomorrow? I said, without meaning to, "Are they alive?"

"Who?" said Yebbe.

"Them. In there. The... what Uncle Yanle's painting for me."

"Sure, they're alive," said Dres. "My granny hears them at night. They crawl around in there like glow moths in a jar. That's why the window's barred. To keep them in."

"Your granny's deaf as a skillet," said Yebbe.

"The other granny."

"That one's crazy. Anyway how could she hear them from clear over in—"

"She hears things. She heard the ghost dog that time, she heard the earth bull bellow before the walls shook."

I let them argue. Suka was yanking and kicking, yelling "Teedy!" I made another, worse face for her, gnashing my crooked teeth.

I knew Dres's granny, she was crazy all right, she talked to her shoes and smoked a pipe like a man. I didn't know what to think, what to believe.

Uncles can't be gods. Men can't be gods. Yet tomorrow, when I'm a man, I'll have my own good neighbor and I'll dance and Suka will see me, she'll think I'm a god the way I thought Ebre was. But I'm not a god! I'm ugly and blasphemous. Is it in the good neighbor, then, that the godhood lives?

I'd seen Uncle Yanle go out with his axe to get cottonwood slabs, with his net bag to fetch blackstone and madder for paint. There was no holiness in that. Was the god in the bull's blood, then? But the bull ate grass and shat same as a goat, and flies walked on his eyes. How could he be a god? The paint was just paint. What if the good neighbors were just, well, masks?

It was hard to say that word even in my head. I made myself say it. What if they were just slabs of cottonwood, dried, punched with eye and mouth holes painted by our uncles to scare babies and women with? I'd seen Yanle come to dinner with paint on his hands. He'd scratch his armpits, sit down, and eat pig.

I started to sweat in the middle of my chest. What if there weren't any gods? What if it was all a men's secret, some grown-up lie?

"Your granny drinks gin," Yebbe told Dres, kicking him out of the grass. "Come on, stoneheads. They'll call us in early because of tomorrow."

I rode Suka screeching on my shoulders. We went off to the dark north pasture and caught glow moths together for the last time, and put them in the jar. I made bars of my fingers and tipped the jar so Suka could look in to see the clay walls bathed in cold light, the little blazing beings pumping their soft abdomens and clambering on each other in their prison. By their light I saw her face, round and ignorant and sweet.

Nobody cared if I went out at night. There are fish in our creek, yuj, they'll rise to torchlight better than sunlight. I'd often gone midnight fishing with Dres and Yebbe and come home in the pink dawn with breakfast. Nobody stirred in the big room, except Suka curled up between my sister and the wall. She opened her round eyes once and shut them.

The streets felt different. It wasn't the three of us sneaking and snorting, pissing on the headwoman's gate because there wasn't anybody to see us. There was only me, keeping to the shadows as if the

moonlight was too bright, looking behind me at nobody looking. The alleys grew longer, and the moon stood in the sky like a stone.

I crept past the pig sties. Nothing stirring. The goats were lying down, the turkeys made a little gabble but no trouble. I heard a wild dog laugh, out there in the desert, and the bull at the far end of his pasture stood still as ivory. The Men's Hold was asleep, smelling of wood smoke and midden and scraped hide.

Because of the glow moths I half thought to see light at the little barred window. But it was black, a mouth with bars for teeth.

I ducked under the fence. I thought, I'll grab the window bars, pull myself up, and look in.

I stepped close, but not too close. Somebody had planted spear-bush under the window and made it a wicked place to fall. And I didn't want to take hold of the bars, for fear something inside might seize my hands.

This thought made me wipe my hands on my thighs. But what would a handless thing have to grab with? Teeth? I stood with my hands tucked under my arms, cold as bone, refusing not to know what I would know.

No sound came from inside. Not the flutter and thump of moth wings in a jar. Not even the scratch of a rat.

I shuffled closer, careful of the spearbush. I was taller than I thought, on tiptoe I could almost look into the window. All inside was black. A cold, ordinary breath came out, bearing the smell of paint.

I thought, *I will look.*

Then I thought, *I'd rather be killed whole than have something bite my hands.*

The bull in the pasture moved his head to watch me, moonlight on the wet of his eye. Like Uncle Yanle I walked through the dewy browse to the wooden door, lifted the latch, and pushed the boards with the flat of my hand. The door creaked open to the width of my face.

Nothing happened.

I pushed it again. It was an ordinary door, opening on an ordinary dark room that had a cluttered feel, like the cubby where Mam keeps rug beaters and the churn. A little moonlight leaked in. I could see a clutch of paint pots, and the old twice-cracked mirror that Yebbe's auntie had thrown out.

I shoved the door wide. When I could see what hung on the walls my heart gave a jolt like a cart. But they hung still as leaves on a catalpa tree.

Looking at the masks, I could tell which ones my uncle Yanle had made. I knew his brushstrokes from the headboard he'd painted for Mam. I could tell which masks were Resne's from over the ditch, and which were Shub's—that's Dres's dad, he paints in curly lines like bindweed—and which belonged to Yebbe's dad, who can't paint at all, his bulls look like dogs. It was as if a bunch of my neighbors were there, good neighbors in fancy dress for a festival, hanging patiently on the wall. I'd seen every one of those masks at the dances, and I'd been afraid of some of them. There they were, hung up in rows like hats.

I stepped right into that room. It smelled like a wagon maker's, of paint and grease. My heart went raw and exultant and empty. I thought, *You old men! You old men telling lies, scaring us boys into believing there are gods! Making us think with half our minds that you're gods—that you're the bosses of the world!*

For none of it was true. Not the songs and cries and tears, not the prayers and blessings, streaming ribbons, thudding chants and weeping women. It was nothing. A game, like moth catching. Wood and paint to frighten babies.

I saw my life, how it would be. After tomorrow I'd come to this room with the other uncles and I'd paint masks, I'd wear them, I'd dance, and Suka would think I was a god. I'd be wise and deceitful and there would be no gods in the universe, only men in masks.

I even knew which mask would be mine, for on the battered work-table lay one painted by Uncle Yanle's hand.

He had carved a youth, smooth-skinned, long faced, and hand-some, with white straight teeth and a full mustache. I tasted bitter-ness in my mouth like blood. I was to wear the face I had always wanted, and would never have.

I picked up the mask.

It was so light, it lifted faster than I expected. It wasn't ready to wear yet, for it had no harness or whatever rig the uncles would give me, tomorrow, to keep my fake god face on. Taking the thing in both hands, I set it against my cheekbones to see what the lying grown-up world would look like through the eye holes.

It looked little. Like a framed picture, sharper than the world is, and darker. Through those eyes I looked around at everybody else's masks. I couldn't see much, only shadows. Still holding it to my face I swung round and looked out the open door, across the village fields where the ditch runs, to the corn all gathered and just the

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stalks left standing white in the moonlight· the narrow, ploughed valley I was born in, and the wild mountains beyond.

Across the field the bull moved sleepy as a dream, a toy bull, no danger in him. I reached out both hands to pick him up.

I couldn't, for he was still the real bull in the real field. But the mask didn't fall.

I put my hands back to the edges of it. Wiggled it. It didn't move, or barely, and I felt that motion in the bones of my face.

I wiggled it again. Tugged.

Then I wrenched at it. I was the bull wrenching at his own horns, panting, sobbing; my breath dampened the inside of the mask. I staggered in the doorway, battering my head, my own face against the thresho.d like an elk battering the velvet off his horns, smelling the bull's blood in the paint, my own blood.

I stumbled, sat down on the clay floor sobbing, clawing at my face, my very bones. In the twice-cracked mirror I saw myself, a god-youth with smooth cheeks and mustache, my white teeth grinning like a fox's, so pointed that when Suka saw me she would shrink away, call-ing, "Teedy! Teedy!" for him she would never see again.

"Suka!" I sobbed.

Under my fingernails the ridge of the mask shifted. Lifted. The mask began to pull away from the rest of me, like a ripe scab.

I was afraid it would tear off my whole face, draw my guts out through my mouth. Then I couldn't bear it, I wrenched the thing off, hurled it away, and sat on the floor faceless, bone-naked, running blood.

I put up my hands. It wasn't blood, only tears and sweat and snot from blubbering. I opened my eyes and saw myself in the mirror, my spotty round face and crooked teeth, my downy lip. The mask lay in a corner in the windless moonlight, its paint unmarred and glis-tening, still as a stone.

I scrambled over the threshold, pulled the door shut, and dropped the latch. I heard a little scuffling sound within, a dragging, and fled away across the dewy pasture with no thought of the bull, I was too fast for him anyway, thinking only of the sound that was the mask creeping back onto the table so it would be there tomorrow, smiling, when they'd made me a man who could bear to wear it, when Uncle Yanle came, and me with him, to open the door and go in. ❧

Even in the most ordinary of lives the extraordinary can happen, and when it does it changes things forever.

The Summer of Lucy

BY KATE RIEDEL ILLUSTRATION BY LAURIE HARDEN

Her christened name was Isabelle and her formal name was Mrs. Edward Reimers. But the one by which every one knew her was Dot, and it suited her; small, nicely rounded, and by preference, cheerful, busy, and kind.

At the moment she was weeding and thinning rows of carrots and beets in the heat and dust of an Iowa summer. In the still air, under the high sun, she could hear, from the hayfield past the windbreak, the faint jingle of harness, the rattle of the mower, and Ed's voice calling to the horses. The other animals, even the chickens, had taken silent refuge where shade offered. Dot's ear was cocked toward the house, in case the little girls woke early from their nap, so the lapping sound had probably been going on for at least a minute before she heard it.

Dot sat back on her heels and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Well. Where did you come from?" she asked the black-and-white dog drinking from the watering can she had left at the end of the row. "It's all right," she said as the dog cringed back. She remained still until the dog returned to the water.

"It's all right," she said, rising. "Poor thing. Poor thing."

The dog cringed again, but allowed Dot to put her hand on its head, scratch it behind the ears, run both hands down its sides to feel the ribs protruding under the dry hair. Then it whined softly, just once, licked a plump hand, and stretched out to let Dot stroke its sides, turning its head to watch her from cautious brown eyes.

Her head.

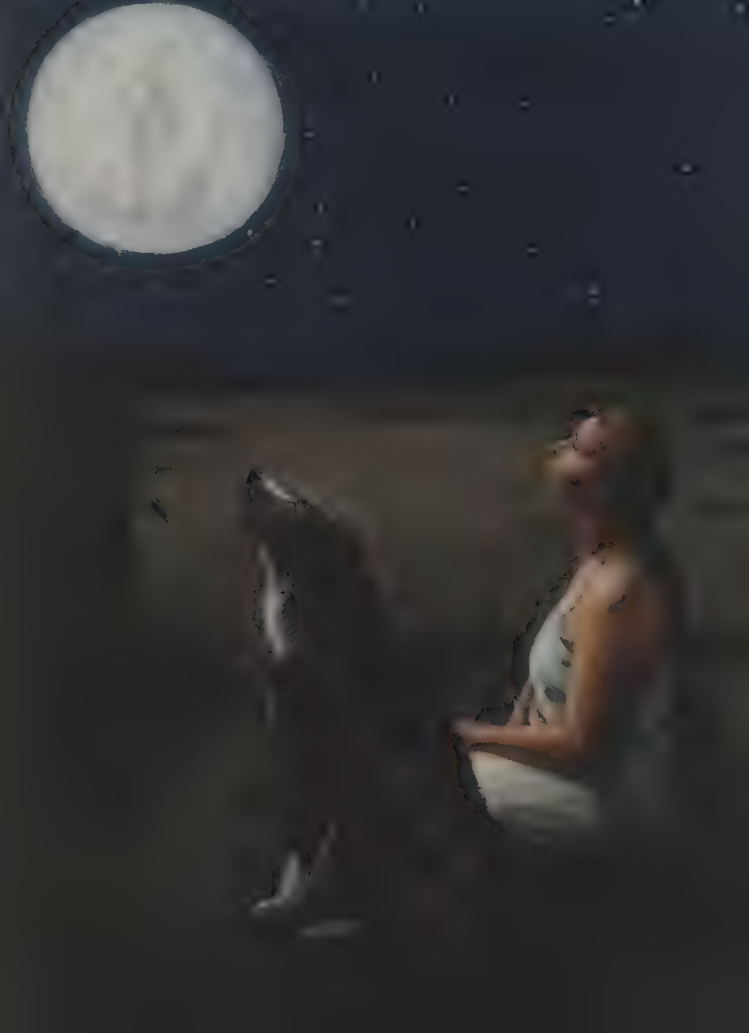
"Oh dear," said Dot, tears coming unbidden at the sight of the dog's swollen teats. "Did you lose them all? Oh, I do know, poor thing."

She rose and went to the house. When she came out with a plate of scraps the dog waited quietly in the edge of shade cast by the porch until Dot had set down the plate. Then she stepped forward and ate, hungrily but neatly. After, she lay down, sighed, and closed her eyes. Dot left her sleeping in the shade, a bowl of water beside her, and went back to work.

"I see we have a guest," Ed said, coming in for supper and kissing Dot before washing his hands.

"Momma found a dog!" Margaret announced, and Nancy echoed "dog!"

"I borrowed some of your bag balm," Dot said. "I'll give her some glycerine and aspirin tomorrow, against worms. And bathe her the day after. Worming and a bath both on the same day might be a little much for her.



Leave her alone for now, all right, girls? We don t know but that she's sick, and anyway she needs rest Have you heard of anyone who's lost a dog, Ed? One that's just had puppies?"

"Momma says she lost her puppies," said Margaret "Like we lost our little brother "

"That s what it looks like." said Ed. "So be nice to her I'll ask when I take the cream into the Co-op tomorrow," he added to Dot.

"No word of anyone losing a dog," said Ed when he returned the next day. "Letty Olsen couldn't sleep a few nights back because there was one making an awful racket over at Harry Clute's."

"That man shouldn't be allowed a dog!" Dot said indignantly

"He claimed he didn't have one, when Letty complained Anyway, Shorty at the Co-op said he'd ask around."

The dog let herself be bathed with little protest, and was tow eled off and brushed by Dot with an old hairbrush Then Margaret and Nancy were allowed to pet her, tentatively at first, until she licked Nancy's face, and Nancy threw her arms around her and kissed her back

"What's her name?" asked Margaret, and without thinking Dot replied, "Lucy."

That night when Ed went out to milk he found the cows already at the door. Lucy sitting to one side and wagging her tail "And she hadn t chased them," Ed told Dot. "she'd herded them."

She didn't chase the barn cats, either. although she treated them with disdain

"They work too," Dot told Lucy "They catch mice "

When Ed went out to rake the hay, Lucy went along, and made her own point about the cats "You should have seen her go after the gophers!" Ed said.

A few days later Dot was sewing patches on Margaret's overalls when Lucy began to bark, steadily Dot went to the door and saw a man walking hastily away from the front gate. Lucy barked until the man had disappeared over the slight rise in the road.

"The poor man might have been hungry," Dot said reprovingly to Lucy The phone rang behind her, Margaret answered it. "It's Mrs. Olsen," she told her mother.

"Letty?"

"Hello, Dot Margaret sure is growing up, isn't she? She answered the phone so nice! I just wanted to let you know that there was a tramp stopped by here yesterday and when I went out to the chicken coop this morning there were two hens missing At least it wasn t any of the good layers. I called Mary Burke and she said the same thing happened to her, and the Rybergs are missing some rabbits And after feeding the man"

Lucy got a pork chop of her own that night, instead of just scraps

Dot lay awake that night, listening to Ed snoring quietly Her hands lay on her belly, which had once carried Margaret, then Nancy, and then James, who had never heard his name spoken because the umbilical cord had twisted around his neck James, who was only a name on a piece of marble. James, who was, as Reverend Fluellen had read from the service, "safe in that home where sin and sorrow cannot enter . "

A rectangle of bright light gradually crept across the bed. The moon was full tonight. And a low moan, almost a sob, rose into a sound of loss and grief and fear, wave on wave from the earth to the heavens

Margaret and Nancy slid into the room, whispering "What's that?"

"Just Lucy, howling at the moon," Ed told them.

Dot pulled on her slippers and went down the stairs and into the yard, where she knelt beside Lucy, gazing up at the moon with her. For a moment Ed almost expected his dear plump little wife to mingle her voice with the dog's. He wondered what they saw in that cold disk high above the familiar cultivated fields and buildings and pastures

"Why does Lucy do that?" Margaret asked

"All dogs howl at the moon, at least once in a while," Ed said. Although he had never heard that degree of despair in a howl. not even in the wolf howls he had heard up north in Minnesota when he was a boy

Lucy's howls diminished to a moan, then died away in a whimper. "It's just the moon," Ed told the girls "What do you say to the moon?"

"I see the moon and the moon sees me. God bless the moon, and God bless me," said Margaret, and Nancy recited along with her as best she could. "Is that what Lucy's saying?"

"The Indians, they thought their grandma lived in the moon when she wasn't traveling around checking on her grandchildren. And she had a dog to keep her company, just like your Ma."

"Maybe," said Ed When he had got the girls tucked into bed and asleep again, he went downstairs and found Dot half asleep in her rocking chair, her hand trailing to brush across Lucy's now silky coat. Lucy raised her head and regarded Ed soberly from intelligent brown eyes

She might bring the cows in to be milked, she might kill vermin in the barn and fields, she might let him scratch her behind the ears and call her a good dog, but her loyalties did not lie with Ed. Ed had never approved of dogs in the house But he did not then, or ever protest Lucy's presence in the house because he loved Dot more than anything, even more than their daughters whom he loved mightily indeed, and whatever eased her grief eased his too.

"Time to come to bed, sweetheart," he said quietly

Lucy followed them upstairs and curled up on the rug at the foot of the bed, and they all slept

"That's a real fine dog you got there, Missus," said a voice from the gate

Dot pushed back her straw hat and looked up Since Lucy was alert but not growling, Dot wasn't afraid, although the man was a Negro, a rarity in that part of the country except on the occasional road gang.

"Thank you." said Dot, rising Margaret, who had been carrying the weeds to her wagon, and Nancy, who had been sifting the fine dust onto her bare legs, moved shyly behind Dot

"Could I ask for a green onion or two?" the man said. "And maybe some water?"

"Of course," said Dot, pulling not only green onions but new radishes and three young carrots She wiped them on her apron, and handed them to him "Come up on the porch and sit "

She went to the kitchen and returned with a sandwich and a glass of milk, and a loaf of bread and a canning jar of water for the man to take with him Dot gave the jar and the loaf to Margaret to hold while the man ate

"She's sure your dog, Missus," he said between bites "Like the woman in the moon."

"I thought it was a man in the moon," Margaret found the courage to say

"The Indians, they thought their grandma lived in the moon when she wasn't traveling around checking up on her grandchildren. And she had a dog to keep her company, just like your Ma "

Dot laughed and took the glass back. "Give the man the water and

bread," she said to Margaret, who stepped forward, shy once more, to do so.

"Thank you, Miss. Missus."

"You're welcome as the flowers in May," said Dot.

"Why is his skin so dark?" Margaret whispered to her mother as the man walked away.

Instead of answering, Dot asked, "Did you see the inside of his hand when you gave him the things?" Margaret nodded. "What color was it?"

"Pink," said Margaret.

"And what color is the inside of your hand?"

Margaret turned her palm up. "Pink."

"See? We're all the same inside. Now let's get back to weeding." She adjusted her straw hat and knelt once more, Margaret went for her wagon, and Nancy went back to playing in the dust. Lucy stretched out and went to sleep, but soon her feet twitched, and she whined and growled.

"She's just dreaming," said Dot. "Maybe about chasing gophers."

"How do you know?" asked Margaret.

"Well, I don't," said Dot. "But, if you want another story about dogs, my mother told me that if you put your hat over a dog's head when it's dreaming, you'll dream the same thing." And she laughed and took her hat from her head and flipped it over Lucy's. Lucy rose, shook the hat from her head, stalked away a few feet, sat down and looked reproachfully at Dot. "I'm sorry," said Dot. Lucy shook her head until her ears rattled, but looked less reproving. Dot picked up her hat and put it back on.

"And so," Dot read, "'the soldier took out his tinder box and struck fire, once, twice, three times. And there were all the dogs—the one with eyes like saucers, the one with eyes like millstones, and the one whose eyes were big as the round tower. "Help me! Save me from being hanged!" cried the soldier ...'"

Margaret and Nancy sat scrunched up against their pillows, arms tight around their knees, eyes big as the dogs', as Dot finished, "The wedding took place in a week and the dogs all had seats at the table, where they sat staring with all their eyes.'"

"But they weren't really the soldier's dogs," said Margaret. "They were the witch's."

"Maybe," said Dot. "Or maybe not. Maybe the tinder box wasn't hers, so the dogs wouldn't be, either. But the story doesn't tell us."

"Why doesn't the story tell us?"

"Maybe because the man who wrote it wanted you to think about it."

"Our Margaret's going to be a lawyer," Dot told Ed when she joined him downstairs and told him about the story.

Dot did not dream of chasing gophers that night. She could not have said what it was she did dream, but she woke feeling chilled to the bone despite the summer heat, with a sadness so deep that she could never climb out.

Lucy moved quietly from her rug to Dot's side of the bed. When Dot reached down to bury her hand in the thick fur around Lucy's neck, she felt the dog was trembling too.

We'll eat, this winter, Dot thought as she looked out the window at the waning moon. The fruit trees didn't winter kill like we were afraid they might. We have a lot from the garden. Hogs for butchering.

But some things they would need money for, like flour.

We can grind our own corn into cornmeal. There'll be some corn. Like coal.

We can burn corn cobs, like last year. And the maple back of the barn is nearly dead, we can cut that for firewood.

Like winter coats for the girls.

I have an old coat I can cut up and make into a coat for Margaret, and Nancy can have Margaret's old coat.

Shoes?

We'll manage.

If only it would rain. It wasn't too late for rain, yet.

"'Oh God, who foldeth back the black mantle of night to clothe us in golden glory of day,'" she prayed, "'chase from our hearts all gloomy thoughts and make us glad in the brightness of new hope, that we may successfully aspire to unwon virtues.'" And finally the black mantle of night did lift and it was time for Ed to do the morning milking before getting ready for church.

They walked to church. Only people who lived a long way away drove to the little country church, except for Harry Clute, who always seemed to have money for gas and a new car every two years.

Reverend Fluellen prayed for rain, and the congregation sang:

We plow the fields and scatter
The good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered
By God's almighty hand.
He sends the snow in winter,
The warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine,
And soft refreshing rain.

But when they left the church there was no soft refreshing rain, only the steady noon sun beating down and the dust rising from the road in insolent, lazy spirals.

"Not much good praying," said Harry Clute.

"Well, Harry, if you can make it rain—" Ed began, but was interrupted by Lucy who had followed them to the church and waited outside. She came to Dot, tail wagging, panting slightly in the heat, her brown eyes, not quite as big as saucers, raised to Dot's blue ones.

"So that's where my dog got to!" Harry Clute said.

Lucy's tail stilled, and she stretched her head toward Clute, snuffling. Then she raised her hackles, and bared her teeth in a growl.

"Doesn't act like your dog," said Ed. "I wouldn't do that," he added as Clute reached for Lucy's collar. Clute snatched back his hand just as Lucy snapped.

"I know that dog," said Letty Olsen. "She's not yours, Harry Clute. She was with that old woman I saw coming down the road not far from your place. I noticed her because you don't see many women on the tramp. And because she didn't stop at our place, which is what most of 'em do after trying yours."

Someone tittered at that.

"She sold her to me," said Clute. "I paid good money for that dog, and I want her."

"She's Momma's dog," Margaret spoke up. "She doesn't like you, and anyway you wouldn't pay money for anything. You put buttons in the collection plate. I saw you!"

This time it was a roar of laughter. Ed and Dot hastily said goodbye, Ed picked up Nancy, and they began the walk home, Lucy trotting beside Dot. Margaret tugged at Ed's suit jacket.

"Did I say something bad, Daddy?" And when he seemed to have trouble answering, "It's true. Everyone says so, so I watched him today, and he did!"

"Sometimes you just need to be a little careful about how you say the truth," Ed managed.

Dot added, "Sometimes it's more polite to say nothing. But they weren't laughing at you, honey, they were laughing at Mr. Clute. Did you notice, Ed, the way Lucy sniffed at him?"

"Wanted to be sure she recognized him, so she could avoid him," said Ed.

"Maybe. But it was almost like the way she does when I've come back from town, when she wants to know where I've been and what I've been doing."

After Sunday dinner, while Ed took his Sunday afternoon nap and Margaret read the funnies to Nancy, Dot sat on the porch swing, Lucy beside her on the floor and resting her head on Dot's knee.

"I am his majesty's dog at Kew. Pray, madam, tell me, whose dog are you?" Dot recited to Lucy. Not Harry Clute's, she thought. Even

if he paid money for you, you'd never be his dog. What about the old woman you were with? Where did she go? Did she really sell you? I can't believe that either, especially not to Harry Clute, no matter how much she needed the money.

But of course there was no answer from Lucy, unless a lazy thump of her tail on the floorboards counted as an answer

And why hadn't the old woman turned up at the Olsen's? Letty never turned down someone asking for a handout, even the stolen chickens hadn't stopped her. Of course, if the old woman had money

"I just don't believe it," Dot said aloud, and Lucy thumped her tail again. Dot sighed and opened her copy of *The Woman's Home Companion*, and Lucy sighed and put her head on her paws and went to sleep.

"Look at the moon," said Margaret. "It's following us to Farm Bureau! I see the moon and the moon sees me!" And Nancy managed to finish this time: "God bless the moon and God bless me."

The Olsen's front yard was full of cars. Margaret scrambled out to join the other children already playing tree tag. Nancy followed.

Tonight's guest speaker was a representative of the U.S. Agriculture Department who outlined the latest farm aid programs—from too much to too little, Ed thought, remembering how a few years back he'd been paid to not raise so much corn. That had been okay, he'd renewed the field by rotating to alfalfa—the Agricultural College had some good ideas. But now he'd be lucky if there was enough for his own stock.

Letty provided generous sandwiches and coffee, and other women had brought cookies, and Harry Clute, as usual, ate twice what anyone else did. If he wants a wife to cook for him, he'll have to learn to be less chintzy, Dot thought, although she couldn't imagine any woman willingly marrying even a nonchintzy Harry Clute.

"Well, you all voted for Roosevelt, but I haven't noticed he's made it rain yet," Clute said around a mouthful of sandwich.

"How do you know I did?" said Dot. "I don't tell anyone who I vote for, not even Ed."

"I don't see you out there beating a drum and making it rain, Harry," said Jack Olsen.

"I don't have to beat a drum," said Clute.

"You saying you can make it rain?" Ed asked.

"Maybe."

"So why not do it?"

"I don't do anything unless I get paid for it." He reached for the last sandwich.

"Boy, that's true enough." Dot said to Letty as she helped with the dishes after the others had left.

"It's a good thing no one believed him," she said to Ed as they drove home.

"I'm not so sure they didn't," said Ed. "People believe strange stuff. Look at all those sayings your mother comes up with."

"But I don't believe them. Or a lot of them. Some are just common sense."

"Letty Olsen won't plant her garden while the moon's waning, no matter what the weather."

"I don't know what to say about that. After all, the moon affects the tides, so it might affect plants, too. But I just go by when the frost is out of the ground, and my garden's as good as Letty's." Through the open window of the car they could hear a dog barking.

"That sounds like Lucy," said Ed.

Lucy greeted them, tail wagging, as they got out of the car, but when she reached down to pet the dog Dot felt her hackles still slightly raised. "Someone's been here," she said to Ed, and waited beside the car until Ed had checked the outbuildings.

"If there was, he didn't stay long," he said as they carried the two little girls, sound asleep, into the house and up to bed. "Lucy earns her keep."

"Shorty at the Co-op says Harry Clute's hinting around town that he can make it rain, just like he said at Farm Bureau the other night," Ed told Dot.

"Nobody believes him, surely," said Dot.

"I sure don't," said Ed.

The old moon's horns pointed up. Holding the water in, as Dot's mother had used to say.

Mary Burke said so, too, at sewing circle. "My cucumbers are bitter. No rain."

You could carry water to them, Dot thought. Even dishwater or washing water, if your well's getting low.

As if reading her thoughts, Letty Olsen said, "Our well's okay so far, but how long that will last."

"Harry Clute says he knows an old Indian secret to make it rain," said Mrs. Ryberg.

The others looked at each other. Dot thought there was a furtive question in the looks, one no one dared voice. Yet.

It was the day that Ed came in from the field, red-faced and sweat-soaked from the heat, and said in a voice that Dot had seldom heard him use, "I don't know if it's worth cultivating," that Letty called.

Fortunately Ed went to wash up while Dot talked, so she was able to tell him it was about a pickle recipe that Letty wanted—which was half true. She didn't want to tell Ed that their good friends were ready to give money to Harry Clute in return for making it rain. "Not in advance, I hope," she'd said, and Letty's silence spoke for her.

And, meanwhile, the only moisture their own fields were getting was Ed's sweat.

Not to that mean, conniving old man, she said firmly to herself.

Lucy barked, just a single bark, and a minute later Dot opened the door to Reverend Fluellen.

"My car broke down, just up the road," he said.

"Ed will take a look at it," said Dot, pouring a glass of cold water for him before going out to where Ed was cleaning the barn.

"Sorry for the state I'm in, Reverend," Ed said, following Dot into the house. "I'll go take a look at your car, and if I can't get it going I can hitch the horses to it and get you back to town that way. What are you doing out in this direction?"

Reverend Fluellen hesitated, then said, "This isn't a regular pastoral call, but I thought, as the person in question is a member of my congregation ..."

Ed and Dot waited.

"I really wanted to talk to Harry Clute today, before any real damage happens ..."

Again, they waited.

"You know, he's started saying right out that he can make it rain."

"You surely don't believe that, Reverend," said Dot.

"I don't, and I don't think you do, Mrs. Reimers, Mr. Reimers, but some people do, and some of those are in my congregation, and I know they can't afford to squander scarce money on this ... this devilment!" he concluded.

Ed and Dot nodded.

"Maybe God thinks we have to find out some things for ourselves, we are, after all, free to choose. But I have to at least try to reason with Mr. Clute, to try to make him see the harm he's doing."

"Ed," said Dot suddenly, "is there gas in the car?" And when he said there was, "You see what you can do about the Reverend's car. The girls can go along with you, can't they? I'll drive him over to Harry Clute's in our car. Don't worry about supper, it'll cook by itself—pot roast, Reverend, I hope you'll stay and share it with us."

"Organized everything, haven't you?" said Ed with a chuckle. "But, seriously, honey, I don't like you going over there, not after

the way he acted about Lucy. Since that night we went to Farm Bureau, I've wondered if it was him Lucy was barking at — maybe he left early to try and take her "

"Lucy won't be going along," said Dot.

But Lucy had other ideas. She leaped into the back of the car and refused to move, and, for the first time since she had arrived, actually growled at Ed when he tried to pull her out. "More in sorrow than in anger," he joked about it later, but for now he said, "You'd better take her—just don't let her out of the car."

"That's the dog Harry Clute said was his, isn't it?" Reverend Fluellen asked when they were on the road.

"Yes," said Dot, and, after a minute, "Reverend . . whose dog would you say she is? Mr. Clute says she belonged to a woman tramp, who sold her to him, and if he did buy her . .."

"You're thinking of the 'rendering unto Caesar', Mrs. Reimers?"

"Well, yes. But Mr. Clute . animals can be frustrating to work with, sometimes . "

"I think God probably has a special profanity dispensation for farmers," Reverend Fluellen said soberly, and Dot smiled as she went on.

"But farmers have to get along with their animals, even the ones they end up eating, and Mr. Clute . "

"Doesn't get along with anyone?"

"Well, anyway, he certainly doesn't get along with Lucy. But if he bought her . ."

"Animals are worth money, but they aren't money. They have, I think, to a certain extent, thoughts, and they certainly have feelings. As for souls, theology tends to say no, but . . well, I'm Welsh, Mrs. Reimers, and we believe in fairies, you know."

Dot laughed. "That still doesn't answer who Lucy belongs to."

"It would be my idea that Lucy belongs to who she wants to belong to. Now that might involve an exchange of money..."

"To make it right with Caesar," said Dot.

"Exactly."

They turned into Harry Clute's driveway.

"I'll wait in the car," Dot began, but as Reverend Fluellen stepped out of the passenger side of the car, Lucy leaped across the back of the seat and out the door.

"Lucy!" Dot called, and got out of the car to grab the dog. But Lucy didn't run, just moved quietly to Dot's side. Dog and woman stood beside the car while Rev. Fluellen stepped up onto the front porch and knocked at Harry Clute's door.

It's a decent enough farm, Dot thought, looking around her. The house and outbuildings are solid enough. But it's not anyone's home. It's just a business. Our farm's a business, it has to be, and Letty and Jack's, and the Rybergs, but they're homes, too.

Lucy lifted her head, sniffed the air, and her tail went down and her hackles ever so slightly up.

seems to have attached itself to her and her family."

"Oh, no," said Clute. "I need that dog."

"Surely," said Rev. Fluellen, "a dog that doesn't even like you couldn't be much good to you."

"Well then, would Mrs. Reimers be willing to pay me three thousand dollars for that dog?"

"You never paid that amount for her!" Dot exclaimed.

"But that's the amount subscribed to me to make it run, and I need that dog to make it run."

"I fail to see what the dog has to do with it," Reverend Fluellen continued to Clute, "but that is precisely what I came here to talk about. We're all suffering from this drought, and you only make the situation worse for others by—"

Lucy had left Dot's side to snuffle around the foundations of the woodshed, running back and forth. Now she threw herself against the latched door, barking and growling and whining.

Her puppies, thought Dot. This is where she lost her puppies.

She ducked between the two men. Harry Clute realized too late what she was doing, by the time he'd turned and grabbed Dot's arm, she had undone the latch and swung the door wide. Lucy hurled herself through the door and across the dusty floor of the woodshed to a huddled figure in the corner.

Lucy whined and trembled, and licked at the face of the old woman as if trying to revive her.

Clute released Dot and threw himself after. "There!" he screamed. "There's your damn dog! You promised to make it rain if you got your dog back! Well, you've got her back, so—"

Reverend Fluellen marched to the corner where Lucy now stood guard, and Dot followed, rubbing her arm.

"Mr. Clute!" said Reverend Fluellen, bending over the figure. "What have you done to this poor woman?"

"That must be the tramp Letty saw," Dot said.

The old woman didn't smell very good, but then Clute hadn't allowed her much movement, nor, by the look of things, fed her very well. She was thin with more than age, her lips were dry and cracked, and she had sores on her legs. A chain was padlocked close around her ankle, and a heavy staple anchored it to the wall. She clutched a burlap bag on her lap.

"Get away from her!" Clute yelled. "She's crazy!"

"No, Mr. Clute," said Reverend Fluellen, "but I think you are." With one good yank he pulled the staple from the wall, scooped up the old woman, chain and all, and headed for the door.

Harry Clute stepped in front of him, hands and feet against the door frame. "No you don't, Reverend! She promised to make it rain if I got her dog back!"

"But you didn't get her dog back," said Reverend Fluellen. "The dog just happened to come along with us."

The dog didn't bother to try to reason. Lucy leaped for Clute's

"Animals are worth money, but they aren't money. They have, I think, to a certain extent, thoughts, and they certainly have feelings. As for souls, theology tends to say no, but..."

Reverend Fluellen had given up on the door. "Perhaps he's in the barn," he said as he came down the steps and followed the path around the house, past the woodshed and toward the barn.

Lucy dashed after him before Dot could get a hand on her collar, so Dot had to follow.

And Harry Clute came around the corner of the woodshed and said, "Well, Mrs. Reimers, I see you've seen the right of things and decided to bring my dog back. Good afternoon, Reverend. I suppose you're the one who persuaded Mrs. Reimers to return that dog to its rightful owner."

"We did discuss it," said the minister. "Mrs. Reimers would, I think, be willing to reimburse you whatever you paid for the dog, which

throat. Clute tried to fend her off with his arm. Lucy latched on, and, as the minister barged past them, let go and dove for Clute's shin, dodging his kicks as if she were made of light. Once again she leaped for his throat. Clute turned tail and ran, Lucy in pursuit.

"Quick, Mrs. Reimers!" called the minister, who was by now settling the old woman into the back seat of the car. Dot followed. Lucy had abandoned her chase and was well ahead of her, and jumped into the back seat of the car just before the door closed.

"Hurry!" Reverend Fluellen slammed his door. "He's got a gun!"

Please, Dot prayed, please let everything work.

The ignition sputtered. Through the rear view mirror she could see

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Here's What I Know

As we get older our pasts can come back to haunt us. In some cases, quite literally.

BY DENNIS DANVERS ■ ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY B. CLARKSON

HERE'S WHAT I KNOW. When Mom discovered she was pregnant with me, my parents had been separated for some time. Dad had left her for another woman in another town, and Mom had filed for divorce. I was conceived during a short-lived Christmas reunion. Dad wanted her to get an abortion. She refused. On the eve of the date when the divorce would've become final, Dad caught a train back to New York where Mom was living with my brother (four at the time) and begged her to take him back. She did. I was born September 2. Dad was at the hospital, 5:30 in the morning. They were married for the rest of their lives, both dying at seventy-two, a year apart. Dad first.

You have to understand this story wasn't handed to me as a coherent narrative early in life like the time they met as kids or their first date with Aunt Eleanor in tow. I learned about the abortion thing when I was thirteen because they'd argue about it when they got nasty drunk and into dredging up old fights. Since I obviously survived this abortion, lying in bed hearing them argue about it, I could only get but so upset. It was never clear why I might've been aborted. I didn't know the story until years later.

The other woman, separation-while-pregnant, and near divorce details came from Mom over pie and coffee at Denny's while Dad underwent a series of tests at the hospital next door. Dad had just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's at sixty-two, and I was separated from my second wife, so Mom thought this was a good time to bring me up to speed. I already knew Dad cheated on her, had known for years, and Mom knew I knew, but that's another story. I always thought of this as Mom's Story: Pregnant with me, waiting on a divorce, that son of a bitch knocking at the door again, wondering, "Is this going to be like Christmas?"

Once my parents were gone, all this information didn't have to matter anymore. I'd narrated it for two or three counselors over the years—processed it or whatever you call it now. I figure any adult who merely had their abortion discussed in their fetal presence probably has more important things to worry about, since the decision went their way, and they've had years to get over it. I don't feel scarred. Or maybe, at fifty-nine, scarred is what I know.

But then Dad starts showing up, and suddenly it's all supposed to matter again.

He's gotten his memory back, ever since his life flashed before his eyes, and he's been sorting through the pieces, putting things together, and feeling pretty ashamed. He's had time to think, he says.

"Dad, you died twenty-three years ago."

"Has it been that long? Hmmm. It's taken me a while to find you. I wanted to tell you I'm sorry." We're standing in the musty mystery aisle in a used book store where I have more credit than I'll ever use in my lifetime. I was trying to remember the name of an author I'd been on a panel with only a few months before and coming up with nothing, not even an initial, when there's Dad, saying he's sorry.

"For what? You've got nothing to be sorry to me about. You were great. No complaints. Life's hard, and you did the best you could."

"You really believe that?"

"Heck yeah."

He looks stunned. Otherwise, he looks like I remember him before the Alzheimer's. He looks a lot like me, only shorter, a scraggier beard. We could be brothers. He laughs. He's got a nice, warm laugh. "Well, thanks. I didn't think that was gonna go this good. You want to have some coffee or something?"

"Dad, you're dead."

"I know. I like going through the motions. This place around the corner has the cutest waitresses you ever saw."

Here's the weirdest thing. When we're together, other people can see him, talk to him, whatever. They just don't remember him the next day, the next minute, far as I can tell. He orders pie and coffee, flirts with the waitress who keeps filling both our cups. When the check comes, it's for one pie, one coffee, and it's like he was never there. He shows up while I'm walking my dog, and my neighbor shows up with her dog, and we talk, my Dad charming as usual. If Dad had asked her out, she would've gone. As far as she's concerned, it never happened. "I enjoyed our talk yesterday," she says when I see her again. All I did was say, "Judy this is Bob; Bob this is Judy."

This makes it easy at first. We can say anything we want, and nobody cares because nobody remembers. But now he's showing up all the time. Dad never went to a counselor, never processed all this stuff he's been thinking about since he died—events he couldn't have made heads or tails of when he was alive. Before he died he couldn't remember the days of the week, much less the story of his life. Now he remembers it all and has only me to talk to. It's not like I can refer him to a professional counselor. He says he can only really talk to someone he had a close connection with in life. Otherwise they won't remember. I could make an appointment for myself and bring him along, but the counselor wouldn't remember him from one session to the next. Besides, I can't afford it, and Dad doesn't have any money. He can't do anything—make a phone call, drive a car. He can only listen in, ride along. And talk, and talk, and talk.

It doesn't take him long to get to his buried life. "There's something I've never told you," he says and proceeds to tell the story. Mom told me years ago in Denny's. I let him tell the whole thing. I'm impressed their versions don't depart from each other in any significant detail except it's a little more obvious he was crazy in love with this other woman.

"Mom told me."

"You're kidding me. She told me she wouldn't."

"She thought it might help me sort out things with Rachel. We were split up at the time."

"Well did it?"

"It didn't hurt. Mom was trying anyway."

"Yeah. I guess so. Was she still mad about it?"

"You mean back then? No. You were in the hospital. You'd been married most of your lives. To her that was the whole point of the story—not to give up on a marriage. She was glad she forgave you."

"You believe her?"

"Dad. Course I believe her."

"There's a part of the story she doesn't know."

"Still?"

"I haven't talked to her. I can't find her. The dead don't talk. But I read something in the library—in Dallas, when I thought you might still be there. It was Kitty's obituary. She was the woman I left your mother for. She was an actress, a singer. We worked together in advertising doing serial script shows, *Backstage Wife* and *John's Other Wife* mostly. Some *Stella Dallas*. She spoke the lines I wrote, sang the jingles for the products."

"I thought you wrote advertising."

"There was no difference back then. I was part of a stable who ghosted for the agency shows."

Ghosted. "All of this was in the obituary?"

"No. I'm just telling you."

"Maybe you're telling me more than I want to know."

"Maybe I'm not. The obituary said she's survived by a daughter, Maureen Powell, living in Philadelphia."

"So?"

"Kitty was pregnant too. Maureen's the right age—your age. I think

"I knew something was up, that you were doing something wrong—no idea what—and you needed me to play along. It gave me a thrill, made me feel like I'd reached some new level of adulthood."

she's your half sister."

"Jesus, Dad. You got two women pregnant? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking, obviously. I told you I was a fuckup."

"I knew that already. I just didn't know the extent of the damage. So why are you telling me this now?"

"I want you to help me find her."

"Her. Maureen Powell?"

"That's right."

"That's all you've got? Maureen Powell in Philadelphia? When did this Kitty die?"

"1991."

"Dad, that's fifteen years ago. What's Kitty's last name?"

"Beaumont."

"You're kidding. That was really her name? Kitty Beaumont?"

"She had it legally changed. I told you. She was an actress."

"I know. A jingle singer. Why in hell do you want to find Maureen Powell?"

"I want to introduce myself. She has a right to meet her father."

"Dad, death has made you stupid. She's come this far not knowing. Trust me. She doesn't want this information at fifty-nine."

He sulks. It's funny to think of my dad as a big boy, but that's what he was. Now he's a big dead boy. "Maybe you can understand that I'd like to make things up to her, for never once being there for her."

"How are you going to do that, Dad? You're dead." I hate to keep reminding him, but obviously somebody has to.

He looks off in the distance, a gesture I remember, like he was looking down a long, lonesome road where he kept some secret knowledge hidden. In the space of that look, he'd go down that road and back—then tell you the incredible thing he found. "Maybe

I shouldn't tell you this, but I know where some stuff is that could make her some real money."

"Like what, Dad?" I don't hide my skepticism. Mom and Dad had been broke for years before they died. Surely, if they'd had anything of value, they would've cashed it in long before the Alzheimer's set in.

"Like some old records her mother and I cut with friends afterhours playing around. Dirty versions of popular jingles, stuff like that. There were some big stars there that night. Don Ameche, for one. I saw on eBay something like that sold for thousands of dollars, and that's not even the most valuable stuff."

"eBay? You get on eBay?"

"I spend a lot of time in libraries. It's up there on the screens. You have to be patient. That's how I found you. I saw your books on the shelf, waited until someone took one down, and looked at the back flap. It said you lived in Richmond, Virginia. I went to the airport and caught a flight. When I came across that old bookstore, I knew you'd come in there sooner or later. Anyway I know where those records are and a bunch of other stuff, and I can tell Maureen, and she can sell it. Her mother's on the records. It's only right. She might want to keep them. I guess. Sentimental value. C'mon, Den, just help me do this one thing."

He used to call me Den when I was a kid. "No. I'm not doing it. It's crazy."

"I'll do all the talking."

"She won't even remember it when it's over."

"Maybe she will. Maybe she's thought long and hard about who I am her whole life long."

"Maybe she hasn't. Maybe she won't."

"Then what's the harm?"

Have I mentioned that after his advertising days Dad was a salesman most of his life? Pharmaceuticals. He'll wear me down if I let him. I change the subject. There's something I've been wanting to ask him. "Remember that time in New Orleans when Mom went shopping with Jeanette, and you were supposed to be looking after me, but you stuck me in a movie downtown? I was about ten. What were you doing?"

He doesn't hesitate. "Screwing a woman."

"Jesus, Dad. What was her name? We going to look her up next? Maybe her grandkids?"

"I don't remember her name. She didn't mean anything to me."

"Enough to dump me downtown."

"Yeah. She was something. She was a nurse. She reminded me of Kitty Duane. Her name was Diane. Look, I'm sorry. I was a terrible father, I said. You're the one saying I've got nothing to be sorry for."

"Would you stop with that? It worked out. You shouldn't have done it, but that was a big day for me. I knew something was up, that you were doing something wrong—no idea what—and you needed me to play along. It gave me a thrill, made me feel like I'd reached some new level of adulthood. Then when I came out of the theater, and you were late, and I was on the streets of downtown New Orleans by myself, ten years old, it did something for me, made me stronger somehow. Braver. By the time you finally showed up, I'd figured out in my head how to walk back to the hotel if I had to. I never forgot that, growing up a weird loner kid. No matter where I was, what I got myself into, I figured I could always find my way back to the hotel."

"So will you help me find Maureen?"

"We'll see," I say, knowing in my family "we'll see" meant yes, because I could always wear Dad down. "We'll see" was the first sign of surrender. Mom might say absolutely not, but Dad never could say no for long, and neither can I.

When I give in we're arguing in the basement, and we get pretty loud, until I finally agree to go to Philadelphia, and he leaves out the barred back door. Sally comes down the stairs. "Who were you talking to?"

"Just trying out some dialogue." I don't want to go into it. I'm afraid she'll worry. I try out dialogue all the time—two stones above our heads in my office on the second floor, behind not one, but two closed doors.

She glances around the chaos of our basement. She doesn't ask what kind of story I'm working on that has me talking to boxes of videos rescued from the Gaston flood. "Have— Have you been feeling okay lately? You've been acting kind of strange, distant."

There's nothing for it. She's worried already. I don't like to keep anything from her. "My father's been haunting me," I say. Then I tell her the whole story.

"So you're going to Philadelphia to find your half-sister?" she asks when I'm done. By this time we're out in the daylight and have walked twice around the track.

"That's the plan. There's a convention there coming up. I can write it off."

She smiles. "It will do you good to get away."

"You always say that."

"It's always true. Can I meet him sometime?"

"Dad? Sure. Next time he shows up."

Sure enough, he shows up that night for dinner. Fortunately, I've made plenty. I've never seen the woman who didn't enjoy meeting my dad. They might not think so much of him later on, but meeting him always goes well, and Sally is no exception. He gets her to telling travel stories from her days trekking though Africa in her twenties, and we go through every bottle of wine in the house. Dad's in a great mood. He can't get enough of the gorillas. He praises my cooking, which pleases me to no end. He was the one who first taught me to cook. After he leaves, Sally and I make love on the sofa and sleep there.

"What got into us last night?" she asks over our morning oatmeal.

"Dad came for dinner, stayed all evening."

"I don't remember a thing. Except ... Did I tell all my Africa stories?"

"That's right."

"That wasn't just to you?"

"I've heard them all before."

She smiles. "Well, tell him he's welcome anytime."

As I'm washing the crusty plates left sitting out all night, I find myself wishing there was one for him. I piled a plate high. I watched him eating, watched him slip a couple of bites to the dog who stuck by him all evening. But there are only two plates to wash.

Dad prefers to take the train to Philadelphia instead of the plane even though he used to love to fly. "I still like meeting all the stewardesses," he says. "But lots of times there's no place to sit except the toilet, and since this 9/11 thing nobody wants some dead guy standing around who's not on their little list. They keep forgetting about me, but that just makes them even more nervous. There are always seats on the train."

"They're called flight attendants these days, Dad. Not stewardesses."

"Is that right? Okay. They always have their names punned to their chest. I usually call them by their first names. They don't seem to mind. Interesting women, stewardesses. Some of them are small town girls who've been all over the world. I remember this one—"

"Dad, we're taking the train."

We take the train, but that doesn't stop him from talking about stewardesses—excuse me, flight attendants—all the way to Philadelphia, navigating the station, waiting for a cab. When we get to the hotel—so Dad can finish the story of a Delta flight attendant named Juanita—the cabbie waits with the meter off while other cabs stack up behind us. Too bad he's going to forget the unforgettable tale as soon as he drives away.

"Do you remember Braniff Airlines?" Dad asks me as we're waiting in front of the elevator. By the time we get off on twelve everybody in that elevator must be thinking they'll never forget the air

line. Unfortunately, I'm the only one in that boat—in that pressurized cabin at 30,000 feet with Dad and a Braniff stewardess in the galley with a bottle of champagne unzipping her pink boots. Once in the room, I jump into the shower before he can remember another airline, another route, another town, another stewardess, another woman.

When I get out of the shower, Dad's looking out the window. "What do you do when I'm not around?" I ask him.

"Nothing. I was just thinking. You remember that tape we made of jokes the first summer in Houston before I got fired?"

When Dad was transferred as part of a merger reshuffle he came into brief possession of a reel-to-reel tape recorder he was supposed to record weekly reports on. As far as I know, he never used it for that. Though over the space of a couple of weeks, night after night, we recorded all the jokes we knew on it, taking turns back and forth. I soon ran out. Dad knew tons of them, so he taught some to me and let me record them. He thought I did voices and characters well, so he taught me every character joke he knew—Chinese, Mexican, Italian—but I never could do Russians or Germans. I found them too intimidating. When Mark Russell came to a local nightclub, Mom and Dad took me, and I stole a Chinaman joke from him that got me five star reviews even from Mom who usually just laughed and said, "You two are just awful." I don't think Mark Russell does Chinaman jokes anymore. Neither do I.

"Yeah, I remember it. How'd that get started anyway?"

He smiles to himself. "I'd just gotten off the phone with Bill, and the rumors were flying. They were going to can me for sure. They were just looking for an excuse. I knew I wasn't going to have that fucking tape recorder for very long. So I decided to have some fun with it."

"It was a good time, Dad."

"When I returned the recorder, I left that tape on it. Said it was my final report."

I laugh out loud, imagining all those farmer's daughters and bears who walked into bars telling Dad's old boss to fuck himself, and Dad beams. I've surprised him again. Am I really so different from who I used to be?

Jeez. Look at the time, and I haven't even registered yet. I have to get going. I fill him in as I'm getting dressed. "I've got a couple of panels this afternoon, then a reading later. I'll pop into the dealers room some time in there, and come back up here around six. We can go out to eat, work out a plan for finding Maureen Powell. I'm not scheduled for anything tomorrow."

"Can I come along?" He stands up, looking pathetic, like my dog angling for a walk. What do you do when I'm not around? Nothing.

I start to tell him he doesn't have a badge, but I know that's not going to make any difference. The conductor didn't care if he had a ticket. He goes to the movies with me without one. Anywhere I go, he can come along, apparently, if I want him to. I'm not so sure I want him along for this sort of thing. I'm nervous enough anyway. "You'll be bored. It's just a bunch of writers and fans talking about fantasy and science fiction. You never read that stuff, did you?"

"*Topper Lost Horizon.* Edgar Rice Burroughs. *1001 Arabian Nights.* H G. Wells."

"Okay." I hold up my hands in surrender, just like Dad used to do to me.

"Besides, I've never heard you read one of your stories." He gives me a crooked smile. Of course he wants to go. He's my dad.

I was unpublished when Dad died, though he read everything I wrote when I was thirteen, not much since then, since I'd sought out what I thought were more discriminating readers. The story I plan to read is all about him. It isn't altogether flattering. I look out the window too. It's a long way down. "Sure, why not?"

I like conventions, though I'm too shy to ever feel completely at ease with the social side of them. Having an alcoholic father has made me a fairly moderate drinker, and my typical schedule is to rise at four in the morning and sleep at ten or eleven at night. Not a partier's hours.

Dad, however, takes to the convention like a duck to the flock. Wherever we go, he strikes up a conversation with someone who, charmed by his innocent enthusiasm, explains what a "mundane" is, cautions him not to say "sci-fi," or places the whole trekkie thing in its broader science-fictional context for him. This last proves no easy task and leads us into the bar. Dad's *Star Trek*—seen in syndication and processed by the Guisnart of his Alzheimer's—isn't the same as everyone else's. The way he remembers it, the tribbles were in every single episode. Whenever the bridge would tilt back and forth, he claims, tribbles would roll this way and that with the rest of the lurching crew. In his *Star Trek*, Dr. McCoy—prone to paranoid Luddite rants and emotional outbursts—was clearly into the drug cabinet big time. As a representative of a pharmaceutical company, he'd seen it happen to lots of doctors over the years. By the time Dad's spinning his theory of Dr. McCoy, Space Junkie, there's a donut of people around us five deep, and someone buys us another drink.

I don't remember the panels that well except I talk more than usual, and when someone asks if I would call my work "interstitial," I say I prefer to think of it as "intestinal." Dad laughs, and then everybody does, though it turns out Dad didn't get the joke. "I thought you needed some help back there," he says. "Was I right?"

He was right.

In the dealer's room, I turn my back on him for a second to talk to a reader nice enough to introduce himself, and when I turn back around Dad's admiring a woman's boots, the woman as well, of course, and they turn out to be Elizabeth Hand's boots, and I feel like a tribble caught in the headlights. She's flanked by science fiction and fantasy luminaries whose names suddenly escape me, but who've all been on the cover of *Locus*. "Liz says there's a party later, Den, a couple of parties. What do you say?"

Inarticulate strangling noises? I'm not sure. Everyone seems to accept it as yes. Dad goes on to pitch my reading, quoting and misquoting from some of the book jackets he had a chance to study for so long in the Dallas Public Library.

We stumble in a herd to the bar where I have another drink. I don't need and Dad works the crowd, enlisting more recruits for my reading. We ooze into the tiny corner room where my reading is scheduled, packed to overflowing. Dad's sitting up front with Liz and Jeff Ford and Robert Louis Stevenson and Marie de France. There are tribbles spilling out of the podium. McCoy's in an aisle seat, rolling up his sleeve, maintaining di-lithium crystal meth. My hands are trembling.

"Here's what I know," I begin, and then it goes pretty well. When it's over, I shake a few hands. Dad's rounded up for me to shake, and we're planning to stay in the room to hear Jeff Ford read next, when I step out for a moment to catch my breath and notice a woman sitting off in a corner of the bar. The semicircular chair surrounds her like a shell. A suspended light, a flat black cone, hovers above her. I can just make out her name tag. Maureen Powell.

She looks a lot like me. She looks a lot like Dad. Her hair's white like mine. I slip through the crowd. It's significantly quieter standing in front of Maureen's chair. She looks up from her program, and I introduce myself and take the chair across from her. Most of the crowd heads into the reading room, and it grows quieter still. We can hear the clink of glassware as the waitress cleans up.

"I'm not familiar with your work," Maureen says.

"Nor I yours," I say. "You live in Philadelphia?"

"I used to. I moved out west almost fifteen years ago now, after my mother died. I was ready for a change."

"Was your mother's name Kitty Beaumont?"

She starts. "How do you know that?"

"My father told me."

"Did he know her?"

"Yes. They were once lovers. He thinks he might've been your father. Is that possible?"

She holds out a hand, and at first I think she means to cover my mouth to silence me, but she sights along her arm, trying to block out the distraction of my white beard, trying to get past the Santa thing to study my nose and my eyes. "You could be my brother," she says.

I can hear Jeff Ford reading in the corner room, saying, "Back in the autumn of '57 . . ." then someone inside pulls the door shut with a thud, and it's so quiet you can hear the piped-in soft jazz lurking overhead. "Listen. Would you like to meet him?"

"Your father?"

"Our father."

"Is he here?"

"He's in the reading that just started. Can I buy you a drink? You can meet him when he comes out."

"All right. Scotch and water."

I order two Scotch and waters. "Tell me about your mother," I say. "Tell me about Kitty Beaumont."

She tells her mother's story with the first sentence she speaks. The rest is just details. "She told me my father was the love of her life, that he swept her off her feet and ran away with her, only to go back to his wife, and she never got over it." Maureen laughs. I imagine it's how Kitty might've laughed, a childlike, cynical laugh. "I always thought it was a convenient story to justify never settling down, never being satisfied."

Kitty was a chronically struggling radio actress whose career peaked with a brief stint as a contentious in-law on a short-lived TV soap. She was married five times. Maureen was her only child. She shows me pictures of her stepfathers the way some women show pictures of their kids. "This one's Tom, Mom's second husband. He adopted me. That's where I get the name Powell." She herself has never married.

"I started writing science fiction," she says, sipping at her second Scotch, "because I thought we might be aliens. What about you?"

I glance at my watch. The reading's almost over. "There's something I have to tell you about Dad before he comes out. He's been dead for twenty-three years. It's his ghost you'll be talking to."

"You do horror?"

"No. Not really. I'm just trying to tell you. Before you meet him. He's dead." I sip my Scotch.

> "Dear Diary: I got the news today from Dr. B. My worst fears are confirmed. I'm going to have another child five months after my divorce ..."

"Hmm." Her eyes meet mine. We're holding our glasses the same way, looking over our Scotches the same way, probably both of us quit smoking ten years ago, but a cigarette sounds awful good right about now.

The door in the corner flies open, and the room begins to empty out. Dad finds me right away. "That was terrific," he says.

But already his eyes are on Maureen, and hers on him.

"So you're my father," she says, and any introduction I had in mind becomes irrelevant.

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

"Not here," she says. "Can we go someplace else?"

"Do you have a car?" he asks.

Before you know it, we're driving out of Philly into the New Jersey countryside. I'm at the wheel, following Dad's directions, so he and Maureen can talk in the backseat. She knows a lot more about the radio world than I ever did, and they talk about people I never heard of from the shows Dad and Kitty worked on together. Kitty, apparently, kept all the radio friends.

"Okay," I finally say. "Where are we going?" The sprawl has given way to countryside dotted with abandoned farms, every other one for sale. The moon is high and bright.

"It's not much farther," Dad says. He tells Maureen what he told me before about the bootleg after hour recordings and other stuff, and how he wants her to have it. "That's where we're going now," he says. "I found it."

"What other stuff?" Maureen asks.

"There's a box of premiums, practically every one we ever offered. Mint condition."

"Holy shit," Maureen says.

"What are premiums?" I ask.

"Little toys and things for kids mostly," Dad says. "When a character's about to go on a big trek, you offer the Hike-o-Meter, a jazzed up compass for a boxtop and a dime. Membership cards. Magic rings. Kids loved it. Advertisers loved it."

"Highly collectible," Maureen adds. "Where is this stuff?"

Dad points down the long, lonesome road. "There's a driveway a couple miles on the right. Big red mailbox. Can't miss it."

"Wait a minute. What is this place?" I ask.

"You remember Jake?"

Jake helped Mom and Dad move out of the house when they lost it a few years after Dad lost his job and before he got Alzheimer's, offering the loan of his big truck, loading it up to the top, then driving off with two-thirds of their possessions never to be seen again. That Jake, Dad? "Yeah, I remember him."

Dad tells Maureen the story. "This is his place. He's laid up in a home in Newark about to kick off. When he goes, his heirs will get all this stuff. Till then this is an abandoned farm full of stolen property."

"How do you know this?" I ask.

"I spotted him, still working the same scam, rode out here with him with a load. Sure enough. He steals more than he can get rid of, never throws anything away. He didn't know what he had. He never thought twice about a bunch of whistles and plastic rings that glow in the dark."

I pull into the driveway, roll a hundred yards and stop. The place is completely dead.

"And you're giving all this stuff to me?" Maureen asks.

"All except one thing. I want to keep that back. Everything else."

"What?" She's the one who says it, but we're both asking.

"Doesn't matter. It's just one thing."

"All right," she says. Let the old ghost have his secrets. "There's a flashlight in the glove box."

"Wait a minute," I say.

"You want a cut?" she asks.

"No. Should we even be doing this?"

"I don't see the problem. The stuff was stolen. He's asking us to get it back so he can give it to me. You don't think he owes me? He abandoned my mother. You had a father, and I didn't. You going to help or not?"

Dad doesn't say anything, but it's obvious he sees things pretty much the same way Maureen does. "Okay. What do we have to do?"

"There's an old shed where the stuff is," Dad says. "We just have to pry a few rotten boards loose. You two can do it with your bare hands I bet." And that's what we do, loading the stuff into Maureen's trunk, except for the one thing. It's in a little flat box. "Give it to Den," he says. "I can't keep anything."

"I don't want it," I say.

"You don't even know what it is."

Maureen opens the box. Inside is a diary like they used to sell in dime stores. Only this one says Pearl's Diary across the front in fancy

Continues on page 94

Down to Earth About Fantasy

KAREN HABER

How do you make a wizard's cloak look convincing in a strong wi

When is a sword blade too long for its hilt? And just how do helmets fit on heads, anyway? Acclaimed artis[illegible] like spent his own[illegible]-career answering these and [illegible] questions to [illegible]. Now t[illegible] shared them in print with *John Howe: Fantasy Art Workshop* (Impact Books/F+W Publications; $19.99), which he c[illegible] shows his creative processes—and inspiration—while providing down-to-earth advice on how to paint [illegible].

Not that John approves of most how-to books, particularly. "Drawing or painting something to the nine opp[illegible] type contributes with the subject," he says. "To reduce that to a series of pre-programmed responses is [illegible]. There are [illegible] books I find intolerable—the ones that show you how to draw ensembles or [illegible] by starting with a series of ovals and parallelograms and the art books that are filled with [illegible] rings, snapping out the purportedly arcane secrets of composition and golden sections.

He recalls being floored by a "How To Draw Horses" book by [illegible] colored wildly it in a vain attempt to [illegible].

I was a precise primer of what [illegible] to [illegible] shortcuts to artistic [illegible] saying, "By [illegible] copying [illegible] is a [illegible] nutritionally [illegible] copying the work [illegible] a chord. Layers of [illegible] are enriched.

A painter, illustrator, and writer of children's books whose work [illegible], John is the prestigious Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, [illegible] gallery show at the Musée Tavet-Delacroix in Pontoise, [illegible] Galerie [illegible]. In addition to *Fantasy Workshop*, his recent publications include *Tree of Life: The Legend of Faramir* (Tor/Starscape), a retelling of the famous saga for which he provided lavish illustrations, [illegible] and Jude Fisher as conceptual designers on the look of the Rings movie trilogy, and served [illegible] Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. In the latter work on *Fantasy Workshop*, Lee writes, John is a dreamer [illegible] but he is also very practical, well-organized, and—carefully—articulate, and is able to [illegible] and those who [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

JOHN HOWE
'S THE CHALLENGE
OF DEPICTING

He says he can't recall a time when he didn't sketch, and suspects that he may have inherited artistic tendencies from his grandmother, whose pencil rendering of the Castle of Chillon near Lake Geneva hung on the living room wall of his family home. Born in Vancouver, he attended the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs in Strasbourg, and has monographs published on his work including *Myth & Magic* (HarperCollins 2001). He currently lives in Switzerland.

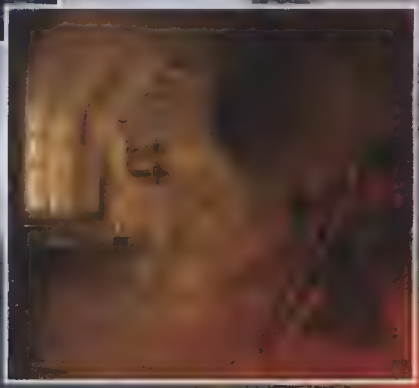
His studio—and attic—must resemble a medieval armory, filled with shields, lances, spears, and pieces of armor from every time period, piled high, awaiting the artist's pleasure. Even Gandalf the Grey has worn a sword owned by John Howe. As he comments in *Fantasy Workshop*, "Being something of a magpie is a useful quality for any illustrator."

The new book allows the reader to peek over John's shoulder into his studio as he explains the importance of reference materials and objects as goads to the inspiration, although he cautions that "it's easy to confuse information and inspiration."

Among the helpful hints he drops are how to paint water, drawing on the run, and what materials he uses. He's strongly in favor of using accurate visual references, saying, "if it can't be real, it should be realistic."

To help convey a sense of reality in fantasy, John recommends looking at history and archaeology. "Of course," he has written, "you can't (always) pick up museum exhibits, and you certainly must not wave them about, but a conscientious reconstruction of an object, one that you can use, abuse, and repair, wear and carry around, can be exceedingly instructive."

The artist's passion for the details can be summed up in one word: integrity. In *Myth & Magic*, he said, "Bestowing a level of integrity on any fantasy world means accepting aspects of it that you may never explore, constructing an alternative art history, creating artifacts and costume styles, accepting inconsistencies and blank spots, finding the best way to make it appear as a realistic universe. Something of a contradiction, perhaps, but the necessarily empirical approach involved ... weaves these inconsistencies into the fabric of the place." It all comes down to "getting it right." John's expertise in and passion for the



authentic details, his knowledge of the times and places, and how the devices were used, makes his paintings live. He also loves the challenge of depicting fantastic subjects realistically, and has gone on record as saying that dragons are one of his favorite subjects because of the pictorial possibilities they offer.

"It's hard to imagine another family of mythical creatures so multifarious. They are absolutely bristling with claws, fangs, horns, and the like, they have bat's wings the size of a 747s, glistening scales to render, and even better, many of them breathe fire! Disappointingly relegated to the role of folktale extras from the Renaissance onward, they become grander as you walk back in time. Compare Nordic Fafnir –those worthiest of worms are pure visual archetypes."

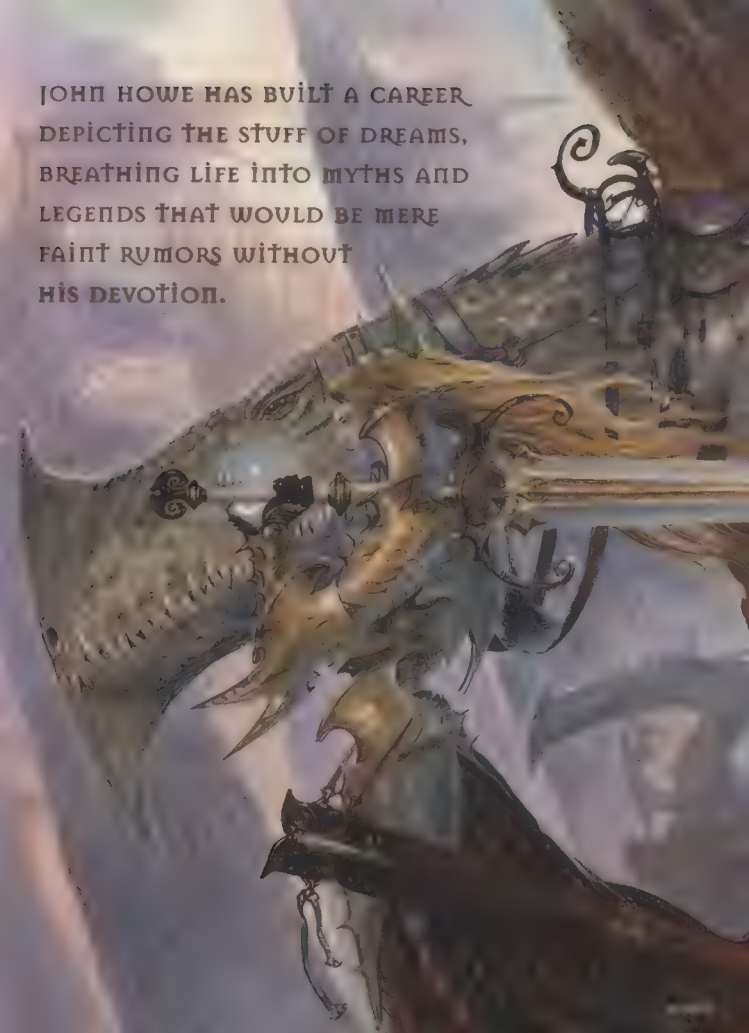
He puts his love of dragons to good use in *Beowulf*, where, at the climax of the tale, the artist evokes a primal, shattering image of a deadly encounter between man and monster.

Of the work *Elves and Dragons* (p. 45, *Myth & Magic Workshop*) he comments, "Thus is the kind of image I most enjoy doing: huge dragons and elves in impossible armor—the full fantasy menu. I spent ages trying to discover a novel shape for the dragon's arms. I finally stumbled on this silhouette."

John Howe has built a career depicting the stuff of dreams, breathing life into myths and legends that would be mere faint rumors without his devotion. He has pinned fabulous images of wizards and demons to the walls of our imagination with his precise, beloved hardware. But his work is about much more than heavy metal. He brings sorcery to his swords: an additional element that sets the subject apart and makes it special.

As he says in the new book, "Awe is not enough. There must be something in fantasy beyond our grasp."

To enjoy John Howe's portfolio and additional commentary, or to participate on the onsite forum, visit www.john-howe.com. Some quotations in this article have previously appeared in *Myth & Magic* by John Howe and *John Howe: Fantasy Art Workshop*.


JOHN HOWE HAS BUILT A CAREER
DEPICTING THE STUFF OF DREAMS,
BREATHING LIFE INTO MYTHS AND
LEGENDS THAT WOULD BE MERE
FAINT RUMORS WITHOUT
HIS DEVOTION.

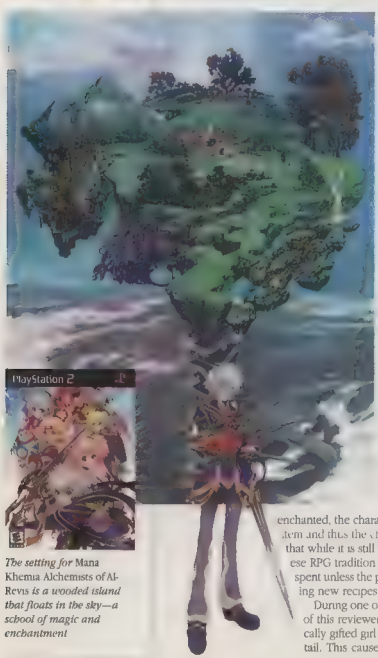
By Eric T. Baker

Al-Revis is just as magical and entertaining as Hogwarts.

A boy is living alone in the woods with his magical, talking cat in the house of a famous but apparently dead wizard when another wizard appears and announces that it is time for the boy to come to the magic academy and the learn the ways of alchemy. Arriving at the campus, which is set on a wooded island that floats in the sky, the boy immediately makes friends with a spunky, magically gifted young girl and with a spunky, physically gifted cat girl. Every one at the school seems to know the boy's name, if not his face, for no reason that the boy knows or that anyone will explain.

It is no accident that the above, which is the beginning of ***Mana Khemia: Alchemists of Al-Revis*** for the PS2 from NIS America, sounds like the same set-up as a certain world-famous series of novels, although Ms. Rowling did not invent stones set in schools, and developers have set games in schools since before there were video games. In Japan, these games even have a technical name, campus sims, but in *MK:AoAR* the designers definitely wanted to evoke Mr. Potter and his school in the creation of their hero, Vayne Aurelius, and his school, Al Revis. *MK:AoAR* is technically the fourth game in the *Atelier Iris* series, but no play of any of the previous games is required to understand and enjoy this one.

Mechanically, *MK:AoAR* is a standard 2-D RPG. Detailed pictures are displayed of the characters when they talk. Cartoony animated versions of them move around the maps and fight in the turn based encounters. Some dialogue is voiced, some isn't. Mechanically, the most interesting part of game is how the characters improve. Each character has a distinctive set of items. As they complete assignments for their professors, they find recipes and ingredients that they can use to enchant these items. Once enchanted, the character's experience points can be spent to improve the item and thus the character's powers and abilities. The effect of this is that while it is still possible to grind old areas in the classic Japanese RPG tradition to earn experience, this experience can't be spent unless the player keeps exploring new areas and finding new recipes.



The setting for Mana Khemia Alchemists of Al-Revis *is a wooded island that floats in the sky—a school of magic and enchantment*

During one of the voiced dialogue sequences, the wife of this reviewer walked into the room just as the magically gifted girl asked the cat girl if she could touch her tail. This caused the wife to comment, "Well, I guess

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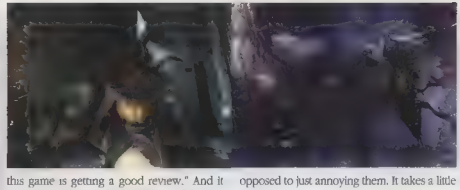
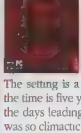


this game is getting a good review." And it is *MK:AoAR* has all the limitations of the PS2 Japanese RPG that it is, but the hero has both a talking cat and a cat girl on his side. The tone is playful enough that much of the humor survives translation, and the story of magic as a school subject is just as engaging in a floating campus as it is in an English castle.

Playful is not a word that can be attached to ***The Witcher***, a computer RPG created for the PC by the Polish studio CD Projekt Red and distributed by Atari. The game is based on the novel *The Last Wish* by Andrzej Sapkowskiten and if the novel is as dark as the game then it is probably hard going.

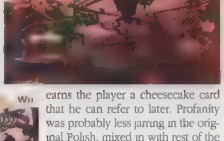


The setting is a medieval fantasy world, but the time is five years after a climactic war, not the days leading up to one. The war, in fact, was so climactic that it isn't clear who actually won. Humanity is still going about its business, but there are lots of foul beasts and creatures about, and some of the foulest are those very humans.

In this world of crumbling strongholds and wrecked villages, the player takes the role of Geralt, a legendary Witcher who has lost his memory and so must begin the game as a first-level character and work his way up, mediating by fires to spend his experience points and regain his lost skills and abilities. In keeping with the gray lines of the game, Witchers are not selfless Jedi Knights. They are mercenaries who wield their swords and spells against demons and monsters for a price.

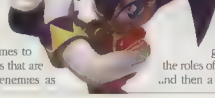
If you have been looking for an excuse to upgrade your PC, or at least your RAM, *Witcher* is the game. Computers with the recommended 1 Gig of RAM will run it, but those with twice that will run it a lot smoother. The graphics are 3-D and the dialogue trees are animated and voiced. Both of these modes are nicely detailed—gritty rather than pretty. Combat is active in that the player has to keep the cursor on enemies to hit and click at the right times to perform the combinations that are key to actually killing enemies as opposed to just annoying them. It takes a little getting used to, but it isn't as twitchy as a shooter title and at the lower difficulties, the game even tells the player when to click.

It is a requirement when reviewing *Witcher* to warn potential players that the characters use a lot of words that can't be said on TV in their dialogue, and that Geralt has lots of opportunities to have PG sex with multiple women in the game. Each such conquest



earns the player a cheesecake card that he can refer to later. Profanity was probably less jarring in the original Polish, mixed in with rest of the sometimes questionably translated dialogue, it is usually just funny. The designers could have left the sex out but in a game where they included rapists, murderers, and racial supremacists, and where it is sometimes hard to find the "right" side in the contests between these characters, it would be odd if some of Geralt's adventures weren't carnal.

Going back to the "playful" side of the video gaming street is ***Nights: Journey of Dreams*** from Sega for the Wii. This is a sequel of sorts to *Nights Into Dreams* which was made for the Sega Saturn in 1996. And no players don't have to have played the original to enjoy this one. In the game, the player takes the roles of two children, first a boy and then a girl. The children jour-



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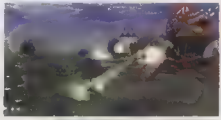
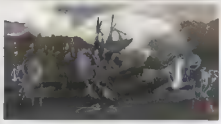
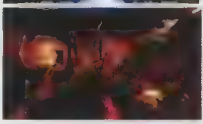
ney via their dreams to Nightopia where they meet and learn to merge with the androgynous Nights. While connected with Nights, they have adventures and literally rebuild their broken hearts.

There are some very pretty cut scenes and a few dialogue trees that help tell the story of the children's lives and adventures, but most of the game is about flying Nights through a series of fantastic and beautifully rendered realms, each with five levels, in what is essentially a well-disguised 2-D platforming game. Few games have modeled the joy and freedom of flight as well as *NiGHTS* does, and yet for all the freedom the player has to move Nights up and down and loop, progress is only front and back. There is no depth to the flight paths.





One characteristic of *NiGHTS* that seems common to a lot of Wii games as developers rush to bring product to this amazingly popular console is that it doesn't use the Wiimote well. The game can be played with a classic controller, a nunchuk controller, or with the Wiimote, but of the three, the Wiimote is the hardest. If you got the Wii in the first place so you could get off the couch and move around while playing, then *NiGHTS* is going to be a disappointment because the best way to control Nights is to sit quietly and aim with precision. If, on the other hand, you are looking for a cute, enjoyable game with a good story that celebrates the freedom of dreams and importance of loyalty and friendship, then *Nights* is a good buy.



Normally in video games, when alien invaders attack Earth, the game is about humanity's brave struggle to overcome and defeat them. This is not the case in ***Universe at War: Earth Assault*** for the PC. As is chillingly portrayed in the intro cinematic and then demonstrated again in the single-player campaign, when the rapacious Hierarchy attacks Earth, the human soldiers can do little against the aliens' walkers, serving mainly as easy targets for their beam weapons. The Hierarchy, however, has enemies of its own, and the invasion has barely begun when the machine race the Novus arrive to harass them, and that conflict awakens the ultra-advanced Masari, who have been hiding on Earth until now.

This setup provides the background for a three-way real-time strategy game between three distinct factions on the global scale of Earth itself. In the single-player campaign, the player actually starts with directing the humans, but quickly moves to directing the

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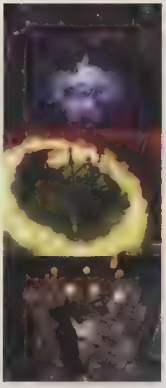
Novus, then the Hierarchy, and finally the Masan so that by the end he is familiar with all the forces for playing the skirmish and multiplayer modes, which are at least half of the game's value

The mechanics of the game are familiar The player constructs factories that build units that are sent against the enemy units Each side has special "hero" units that are much tougher than the line troops and have special abilities that the player can trigger to help tip battles in their favor The three sides are very well balanced while each plays very differently At the same time the stories of the hero characters and the fight to save Earth for humanity gives the single-player game extra impact

The biggest flaw of the game is so simple that the player will have to wonder what limitation of the game's engine stopped the designers from fixing it. In play, the camera can't be pulled back to see as much of the map as players would want There is a strategic map that lets the player jump easily about, but with so many units and so much going on the player keeps trying to pull the camera back to get a bigger picture and being frustrated that he can t see it Other than that, *UnWEA* is a very well executed game so it is a shame this flaw was left in



Two more young magic user games need mention this month One is ***Dark Messiah: Elements*** from Ubisoft for the Xbox 360 This is a first-person game set in the venerable *Might and Magic* universe The player starts as a young apprentice, raised by a powerful wizard, who is sent off into the world to combat the Dark Messiah of the title Adventures ensue as the player takes on legions of undead and other monsters All of this is done from a first-person viewpoint with the player looking down the character's right arm as he swings swords, shoots bows, and casts spells

First of note about *DM-E* is that it uses the *Half Life 2* engine so that there are a lot of "real world" physics built into the game What this means for the player is that it is often easier to attack the environment (knocking down support beams) and let the consequences kill the enemies (barrels crashing down on their heads) than it is attack the enemies directly The other note is that the game includes an online, *Counter Strike*-style deathmatch mode. Players can jump into online fights via Xbox live and fight as one of eight character classes, four on each side There is the option to change classes each time the character spawns, and repeated play earns special abilities that stick with the player

The last game is ***Avencast*** by Lighthouse Interactive for the PC Again, the protagonist is a young wizard in a wizarding school, but this wizard quickly graduates and sets off into the wide world *Avencast* has a third-person perspective, but it has an action combat system Despite that the character is definitely a mage, he spends a lot of time jumping and rolling out of the way of enemy missiles and spells ... while casting his own back There is some melee in the game, but ranged magic is the way to go

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Lucy

Continued from page 73

Harry Clute on his porch, raising his shotgun to his shoulder

The ignition caught. Dot floored the accelerator down the driveway, and decided, as she spattered gravel in a tight skid onto the road, that it would not be polite to ask the minister if he had really said what she thought he said. She tried not to think about the ping and the cracking noise she heard from the rear

"I think he got your rear window, Mrs Reimers," said Reverend Fluellen after a minute. "I hope Mr. Reimers won't mind. He just cracked the corner."

"As long as we're all alive," she said. The church militant, she thought, repressing the urge to giggle

The old woman said only "thank you" when the minister carried her to the house, and "thank you" to Ed when he cut the chain from her ankle. Dot took the burlap bag she had clutched the entire time. "You put in good place," the old woman whispered through cracked lips

"Yes," Dot said through threatening tears

The old woman didn't wince when Dot helped her take a bath and applied hydrogen peroxide to her sores. Finally she was clad in a nightgown--Dot's best--and put to bed in the spare room, the one that would have eventually been James's. She drank a cup of broth from the pot roast, and ate some bread, and fell asleep. Lucy stayed on the rug beside the bed the whole time, but when Dot went downstairs, Lucy followed

Margaret and Nancy were staring at the burlap bag on the porch floor

"We have to have a funeral," Dot told the little girls. "For Lucy's puppies. Will you get the shovel, please, Margaret?"

The four of them stood silently around the little mound under the windbreak, until Lucy turned and headed back to the house, and up the stairs to take up her place beside the spare room bed

The next morning the old woman sat up, and by afternoon she was up and wearing one of Dot's dresses, which was all right for length, but otherwise hung on her thin bones. Reverend Fluellen stopped by in the after noon, and spent an hour talking with her, and came away looking thoughtful. "That's an interesting woman," he said. "I hope I can have another talk with her before she leaves."

The day after, she sat at the table helping Dot cut up green beans for canning

"What should we call you?" Margaret asked shyly, and the old woman answered, with a smile. "Grandmother."

Good," said Margaret. "Because one of our grandmothers is dead and the other one lives too far away. Of course, you don't look like us."

Margaret!" said Dot, but Margaret went on.

"But Momma says we're all the same inside. Nancy, don't climb on Grandmother."

"That's okay," Grandmother said, helping Nancy onto her lap. She looked at Dot, who had her back to them now as she set jars into the canning kettle, and whispered to the little girls, "Want to see a trick?"

Margaret and Nancy nodded. The old woman picked up a long green bean from the basket and cradled it in her palm. As the little girls watched, it fattened, turned brown, and the dried pod opened and spilled a ripe bean onto Grandmother's hand. The bean swelled, split, sent up a sprout, then leaves, stems, cool white blossoms. And finally, a handful of green beans lay between her fingers. She dropped them back into the basket, and put a finger to her lips as Dot turned from the counter

"You're welcome to stay with us as long as you like," Dot said. "We have the spare room, and no one else to put in it."

Grandmother shook her head. "Thank you, but I'm almost well enough to go."

"But you just got here!" said Margaret

"I have lots of other grandchildren I have to visit," said the old woman. "But I will carry you with me in my heart, and I hope you will carry me in yours."

The next day Grandmother was out on the porch, Lucy beside her, when Ed came down to do the milking and Dot to fix breakfast

"Wait to go until after breakfast," said Dot. "Then I'll give you a ride, maybe to town?"

"Will you take me to see that man?"

For a minute Dot thought she meant Harry Clute, then realized she meant Rev. Fluellen. So when they had finished breakfast and Ed had gone out to do the rest of the morning chores, Dot packed a lunch for the old woman, and the two women, two little girls, and Lucy piled into the car

They let Grandmother out in front of the parsonage, and Lucy got out with her

The little girls cried all the way home. Dot wanted to

Dot and Ed lay awake that night. Ed knew better than to offer to get her another dog, but he couldn't think of anything else to say, so he remained silent

It was Dot who spoke first

"Do you know," she said into the dark, "what Reverend Fluellen said when we took off like a dirty shirt out of Harry Clute's driveway?

"What?"

"He said I'm sure he said I heard him." Dot giggled. "'Burn rubber!'" she said, and rolled over into Ed's arms, still giggling

Later they saw the new moon, with horns that pointed down. The clouds that would bring soft, refreshing rain were already gathering on the horizon

"Would you like to have another dog?" Ed asked

Grandmother promised me a puppy from Lucy's next litter," said Dot, still gazing at the moon ❧

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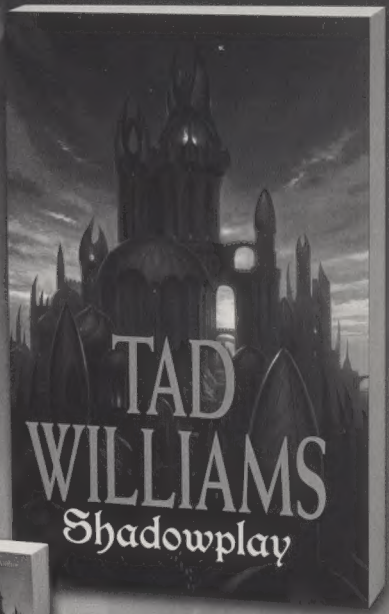

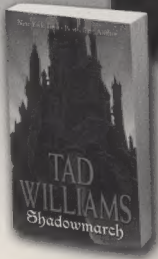

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here's what i know

Continued from page 79

script. "Give me that," I say.

Maureen is fiddling with the lock and key. "Hold on."

"Pearl was my mother's name."

She freezes. "Oh," she says and hands it over.

"What the hell is this, Dad?" I ask.

"It was going to be part of a new show. The premiums worked so great with the kids, somebody thought, why not their moms? The show was this woman's diary, you know? A good-hearted woman married to a faithless man. The idea was we'd get the thing started, then you'd send in and get one of these diaries and write in it like you were the character in the show, and then we'd pick the best ones to put on the air. I think the idea was to try to do a show without writers. They already didn't pay us much of anything or give us a credit."

"Who was going to play Pearl?"

"Kitty."

"When was it on?"

"It never got on the air. That's the diary I pitched it with. Wrote the first couple of episodes in it and passed it around."

"You mean...?"

"Yeah."

I open it up, and read out loud: "Dear Diary, I got the news today from Dr. B. My worst fears are confirmed. I'm going to have another child five months after my divorce is final. Isn't that a kick in the head? How can I tell Robert? How can I not? ..."

Dad's not looking at me. He's staring at the ground. It's his handwriting, but it's Mom's voice. Her life.

"Didn't they go for it?"

"What are you talking about? They loved it. They went crazy for it. I couldn't do it. After I wrote it all down ..." He gestures at the diary. "I just couldn't do it."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Keep it. Throw it away. I just couldn't see it being sold on eBay. It's yours."

Maureen's looking off, brushing tears from her eyes. She snuffles and blows her nose. "It's probably not worth anything anyway. If there was never a show."

By the time we get back to the hotel, most of the parties are winding down, but Dad finds the one where everyone still partying has ended up. We have to squeeze through a stand of tall, well-watered men planted just inside the door angrily discussing the stupidity of recent award decisions and the judges who made them. There's not so much as a sofa arm to sit on, and my back is aching from the drive. My mind is in my coat pocket, in the pages of Pearl's Diary. I want to beg off, but Dad's determined we make an appearance.

Maureen heads toward the remains of a cake. The liquor is decimated, but it's late enough that pretending to be drunk will get me by. We hang in the kitchen where Dad gets into a discussion of faster than light travel that's going nowhere fast. I lean on the counter only to lean on Pearl's Diary. I take it out of my pocket to make sure I haven't damaged it. The thing's older than I am. I look inside. Every page is filled. He kept writing her life as a serial. "Dear Diary," the last entry begins, "Robert's life is slipping away from him, slipping away from me, and I'm afraid ..."

A young woman on the edge of the FLT discussion spots me reading. "What's that?"

I start to tell her. My characters are always telling all to each other. It makes sense to me. I've lived with too many secrets. But not this time. "It's just a notebook," I say and slip it back into my pocket.

"Hey, aren't you Dennis Danvers?" she says. "I was at your reading earlier about your dead father? How did it end anyway?"

"It didn't. He's still dead."

She laughs, thinking I'm joking.

I tap Dad on the shoulder. "Dad, you about ready to go?"

"Sure, son. I guess you've had quite a day."

We say good-bye to Maureen at the cake, push our way though the still-angry men now spinning elaborate theories of collusion and corruption and inside deals. "Those guys all writers?" Dad asks me.

"Definitely. Big names."

"Helluva business." He looks me in the eye, his face serious. I remember this look too, when he was handing out advice, much rarer than secrets, visions, and schemes. "Don't sell yourself," he says. At first I think he means sell yourself short, but that's not what he said. The elevator opens, and we step inside. "I got a new one for you," he says.

I bite.

"There's this dead guy see, hanging out in this old bookstore, when who should walk in but his very own son." He laughs. "Gotcha."

"You sure did."

I hold him, a frail, dead old man until the elevator doors open on our floor, and he says, "I guess I'll be going now."

"Where?" I panic. I don't want him to leave me again. I know I was just complaining about him showing up all the time, but that doesn't mean I want him gone.

"I'm going to look for your mother."

"I thought you already tried that. I thought the dead don't talk."

He looks down that long, lonesome road and nods his head—true, all true. Everything's true down that road. "Maybe I didn't try hard enough. I couldn't really face her before."

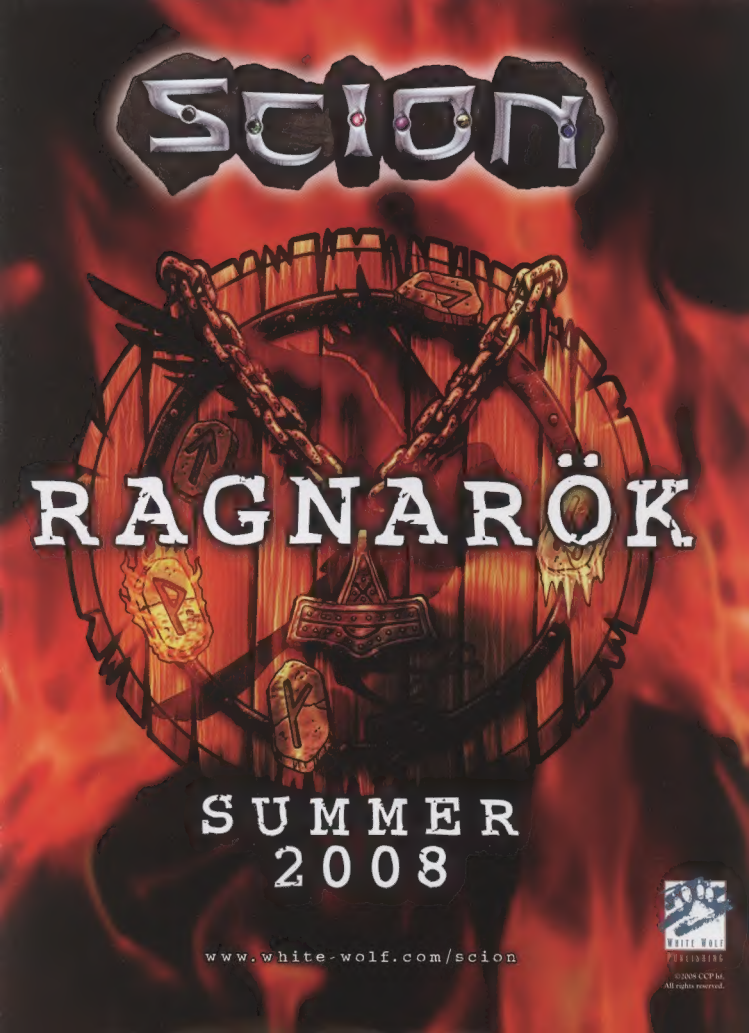
"Because of Pearl's Diary?"

He nods again. There are tears in his eyes.

"Good luck, Dad. I hope you find her. Will I forget you now?"

"No." He points to the book in my hands. "I'm on every page."

He watches me walk the long hall to my room. I don't look back. I go inside and wait until I hear the elevator going down, then lie with the pages of my mother's life, and read. ❧



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